

UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

GRADUATE COLLEGE

LET THE CHURCH SAY AMEN?:

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ON HOW BLACK MALES EXPERIENCE  
WHITE CHRISTIAN INSTITUTIONS

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

By

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Norman, Oklahoma  
2018

LET THE CHURCH SAY AMEN?:  
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ON HOW BLACK MALES EXPERIENCE  
WHITE CHRISTIAN INSTITUTIONS

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE  
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND POLICY STUDIES

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## **DEDICATION**

This is dedicated to the least, lost, left-out, and left behind....

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

“And we know that all things work together for the good of them that love God, and are called according to his purpose” - Romans 8:28

My Faith: Giving honor to my heavenly father God, Jesus Christ my savior, and the Holy Spirit. I am able to accomplish this great task because of the power given to me to do all things through Christ (Philippians 4:13).

My Spouse: My wife, my best friend, my helpmate, my First Lady – Mrs. Kimberley Kierra Chapman. Thank you for believing in me and for always reminding me that the work is less about me and more about what God can do through me.

My Children: Kenneth Michael Chapman III (Trae), Kole David Chapman, Karter Wesley Chapman, Karson Arthur Chapman. Daddy loves you and every day I watch you grow; I pray that I give you what you need to be the Black King that you are destined to be.

My Sisters: Andrea L. Chapman (Anna) and Brittany M. Chapman (Britt), you have kept your big brother humble and endured having a brother as a nerd.

My Parents: Kenneth M. Chapman Sr. and Linda A. Chapman, mom and dad, you have never gave up on me and you always support me no matter how crazy the idea or how much it cost, but most importantly you gave me a love for education and you gave me Jesus.

My Brothers: “The Crew” Eric Baker, D’Angelo Rodgers, Jarone Mukes, and Cordney McClain, from Parkview Elementary to here, you have loved me like a brother and inspire me every day to be a great man.

My Church Family: Pastor Rev. Dr. Edward Jefferson and First Lady Jefferson, your prayers and support have been exactly what I needed and you have taught me so much about ministry and life, thank you. House of Prayer Baptist Church family, thank you for letting me learn how to pastor and for supporting me while I grew up before you.

My Work Family: Koretta K. McArthur, Emily Kuenzi, Dr. Ana Bolino, you all have supported me beyond imagination and I am grateful. Thank you for keeping me focused and encouraging me every day.

My Committee: Dr. T. Elon Dancy II, thank you for your mentorship, guidance, and friendship, you may never know how you inspire me, Dr. Kristen Edwards thank you for challenging me and making me thinking deeper about the gospel, Dr. Myron Pope thank you for mentoring and guiding me from my early days at UCO to this point, I am grateful for your wisdom, Dr. Wesley Long, thank you for always just keeping it real and seeing something in me when times I could not see it in myself, Dr. Derek Houston, thank you for your support and willingness to be a part of my journey.

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## **Abstract**

This phenomenological study explored how Black Christian males experience white Christian colleges and universities. The environment at Christian institutions is most often influenced by white religious norms and, as such, the environment that Christian Black males experience could have detrimental effects on their collegiate success (Blumhofer, 2002). Recent literature explores the issues that challenge Black male college students: Black male enrollment and college choice; Black male persistence; and the support measures required to ensure Black male students' success. Black males' experiences at non-Christian institutions have been studied extensively, but little is known about the experiences of Christian Black males attending Christian higher education institutions. The research literature on Black male students at Christian higher education institutions is largely understudied. Environments can shape experiences, and it is important to understand Black male experiences when they come to a predominately white Christian institution (Chavous, 2000). Using hermeneutic phenomenology, the study explored the "lived experiences" of Black male Christian collegians (van Manen, 1990, 2014). By understanding the experiences of Black male students at Christian institutions, institutions can construct environments that help enhance the success of Black male Christian students.

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

Research and scholarship find associations between college enrollment and financial, intellectual, social, and several other outcomes. Financially, college graduates can expect to earn up to 80% more in lifetime earnings than high school graduates do, due to the specialized skillsets and subject matter content that a college student is exposed to over the course of a bachelor's degree program (Rose, 2013). Academically, college graduates typically exhibit more mature ways of thinking and are more familiar with intellectual matters than people who have not attended college. (Baxter Magolda, 2006). Socially, college enrollment is associated with learning how to work well in groups, communicating clearly, and developing interpersonal adeptness (Rose, 2013). Another outcome of attending college is a broader sense of one's ability to contribute meaningfully to society. This is reflected in the recent focus on "character development" among higher education personnel, who expect and encourage graduates to use their talents to benefit the nation and the world (Chan, Brown, & Ludlow, 2014).

The U.S. higher education system includes several types of colleges and universities with distinct missions. For instance, community colleges offer students a two-year associate degree and often focus on serving the needs of the local community that surrounds the institution (Bok, 2013). Regional universities maintain a balance between teaching and research and often attract students because of smaller class sizes (Bok, 2013). At research universities, heavy emphasis is placed on scholarly research; however, they are still committed to university service and collegiate teaching (Bok, 2013). Historically Black colleges and universities,

tribal colleges, and Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs), collectively known as minority-serving institutions, serve and provide access to higher education for minoritized<sup>1</sup> racial groups in America, as do women's colleges and community colleges (Bok, 2013).

Many U.S. colleges and universities originally were founded on religious principles but became secular over time; however, some Christian-focused institutions still exist to serve the needs of students who identify as Christians (Guthrie & Noftzger, 1992). Many early religious institutions shifted to secular principles because they needed and accepted more financial support from public sources, which required a separation of church and state interests. Denominational tensions were another reason for secularization, as some institutions came to prefer independence from church influence, with many clergy considering themselves educators first and clergy second (Woodrow, 2004). Today, many Christian institutions<sup>2</sup> offer students social activities, strong academics, and competitive athletics, with intentional focus placed on the development of students' religious selves (Guthrie & Noftzger, 1992). "Faith and learning integration" designates what happens when institutions merge the practices of the Christian faith and the practices of the academy into a formative process. At the Christian institution,

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<sup>1</sup> According to Stewart (2013), "minoritized" refers to the process by which minorities are pushed into oppression by means outside of their control, whereas "minority" is the term given to populations that are singled out due to physical or cultural characteristics.

<sup>2</sup> Glanzer, Carpenter, & Latinga (2010) define Christian institutions as colleges or universities that acknowledge or embrace a Christian or denominational confessional identity in their mission statements. In addition, these institutions alter aspects of their policies, governance, curriculum, ethos, and activities to reflect a commitment to the Christian faith that is positioned within Protestantism, which follows the teachings and practices of Jesus Christ, the risen savior and focal point of Christianity. The major tenet of Christianity is belief in the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

student affairs officials are focused on engagement activities that aid students' social and spiritual development. The secular <sup>3</sup> university, by contrast, is an institution of higher learning that is not explicitly committed to religious practices. Students at secular and Christian institutions may engage in similar activities – for example, residence hall activities focused on relationship building and other social development topics – but at the Christian institution, there is an underlying emphasis is on Christian doctrine (Guthrie & Noftzger, 1992). Likewise, in the classroom, faith is actively discussed as an aspect of the curriculum at the Christian college or university. The Christian institution has to ensure that all campus programs and events reflect the institutional purposes while remaining sensitive to the ongoing changes in current student culture (Guthrie & Noftzger, 1992). Dockery (2000) discusses faith and learning integration in detail and explores the history of Christian higher education institutions in the United States, arguing that their sole existence is to integrate faith with learning, thereby promulgating the Christian worldview across the campus and within the curriculum. In addition, Dockery (2000) presents three angles to consider when studying Christian higher education:

- *The foundation of Christian higher education*

The existence and practices of the Christian higher education institution begin with a faith commitment that informs all learning and shapes expectations for living.

- *The purpose of Christian higher education*

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<sup>3</sup> The term “secular” denotes attitudes, activities, or other practices that have no religious or spiritual basis. Secularism in higher education took hold in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when institutions recruited more academicians and fewer faculty from ministry (Woodrow, 2004).

The purpose of Christian institutions is to educate students so that they will be prepared for the vocation to which God has called them, enabled and equipped with the competencies necessary to think in a Christian manner and to perform skillfully in the world.

■ *The goal of Christian higher education*

The goal of Christian higher education is to help students be prepared for work and to see it from God's perspective in a way that will bring glory to Him. This means that students are preparing for a vocation – not just a job or career, but a calling.

Christian higher education operates from a commitment to the religion of Christianity, which is the religious group that follows the teachings and practices of Jesus Christ (Jacobus et al., 2015). Religion is the institutionalized structure wherein individual or group activity involves specific behavioral, social, doctrinal, and denominational characteristics (Schneiders, 2003). Instruction and exhortation of Christian preaching and teaching concern all the themes of doctrine and morals of the Christian faith, and Christianity is divided into different denominations (Jacobus et al., 2015). "Religiosity," which refers to a strict adherence to a religion's beliefs, doctrines, and practices, is distinct from "spirituality"; indeed, religiosity and spirituality do not necessarily coexist (Mattis, 2000).

Researchers use various definitions of spirituality, and it is impossible to settle on a single correct definition, but an argument can be made that the term comes from religious roots (Estanek, 2006). Spirituality refers to the process of finding meaning for life and pursuing activities that help us achieve meaning, which

helps develop our hopes, dreams, and inner being (Astin, 2004). Spirituality is made up of several aspects, including the internal process of seeking personal authenticity; wholeness; transcending one's locus of centrality; developing a greater sense of connectedness to self and others through relationships and community; deriving meaning, purpose, and direction in life; being open to exploring a relationship with a higher power that transcends human existence and human knowing; and valuing the sacred (Love & Talbot, 1999). Spirituality is different from religion, but the two can be interrelated, and practices and rituals of Christianity are found in some forms of spirituality. For this study, spirituality is defined as the pursuit of meaning for one's life and the attempt to discover that meaning, as well as the belief in a connection to a higher power or being, which could potentially express itself through Christianity. It is important to note that, although Christianity is composed of different denominations that hold different doctrinal practices, they all align on the central tenets and teachings of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, some Christians may not identify with a denomination at all and consider themselves to be non-denominational while still remaining committed to the belief in Jesus Christ and his teachings. Stewart & Lozano (2009) have noted that there is a difference between "Christian culture" and "culturally Christian." The concept of cultural Christianity helps make meaning of the ways in which white racial privilege shrouds worship, traditions, and language and reflects racial and cultural inflections rather than anything that may be understood as authentically or universally "Christian" or "culturally Christian" (Stewart & Lozano, 2009). People and institutions that claim to be Christian frequently perpetrate injustice and racism, which are counter to

Christian values, which creates the distinction between “Christian culture” and “culturally Christian.”

My Christian journey begins in my upbringing. I have fond memories of learning to read in the Sunday school, and some of my first social interactions were shaped by my experiences in the Christian church. Later, in my adult years, I answered a spiritual calling and began my journey into ministry, which eventually led to my position in pastoral leadership. I discovered Christian higher education as a student affairs professional, holding the position of Assistant Dean of Student Development and tasked with managing six student development departments. Growing up in a Christian home and having completed graduate work in the field of student affairs, I felt prepared to serve students through the process of integrating faith and learning. Upon starting my position, I found instant connections with young Black<sup>4</sup> males who reminded me of myself. Many were raised in a Christian home and held a strong Christian identity, but also knew what it meant to be Black and male within a predominantly white male institution. As I entered into mentoring relationships with these young Black men, their experiences I gradually realized that they were struggling with their racial and spiritual identity even though they were attending an institution that was designed to help them grow. I attended chapel. I attended campus events. I even visited with spiritual life staff, and I felt empty because the Christian environment that the institution presented did not help me grow. My growth was limited because I was forced to worship in a setting that was

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<sup>4</sup> Throughout this study, I capitalize the word “Black” when the term is used to designate race and/or ethnicity in order to give power and respect to my ethnic heritage through my use of language. However, in direct quotes, I retain the case usage of the original source.

not comfortable for me, one that was influenced by white norms in music and style of preaching. In chapter three, I will address researcher positionality in detail and with a deeper perspective.

Black males who identify as Christian and seek a Christian higher education experience are among the many students who enroll in Christian higher education institutions. In fact, spirituality is something that many undergraduates arrive with as first-year students, and they continue to explore it as they progress through college (Parks, 2000). Religion and spirituality saturate various aspects of Black life and culture. They are deeply woven and intertwined throughout Black history, contributing to an intricate cultural fabric (Wood & Hilton, 2012). Black families tend to embrace the liberating power of religious practices as fuel for resiliency in life and in educational pursuits (Herndon & Hirt, 2004). Hence, Black males may gravitate toward Christian institutions due to their spiritual backgrounds and the church roots that influence their lives (Wood & Hilton, 2012). For some Black Christian males, the Black church might be where their religious roots were established and their spiritual backgrounds began to develop. In defining and discussing the Black church, Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) list the seven independent, historically Black-led denominations: African Methodist Episcopal Church, African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, National Baptist Convention U.S.A Incorporated, National Baptist Convention of America Unincorporated, Progressive National Baptist Convention, and Church of God in Christ. The following three dimensions provide a theoretical analysis of the Black church experience (Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990).



- Religious dimension: The Black Sacred Cosmos
- Recognition of the Black church as central to the Black community
- Dialectical model of the Black church.

The term “Black church” is a shorthand way to describe the worship experience of Black churchgoers (Battle, 2006). In the formal church setting, the Black church is characterized by an emotional experience where spiritual gifts are active and church members actually experience God (Harvey, 2011). The Black church experience includes formal elements, such as a sermon, which is a presentation of the scripture by a ministry leader; a choir song selection; and financial giving through the action of tithes and offering (Rasor & Chapman, 2007). Members may testify by giving a personal speech about their experience with God; be slain in the Spirit, which is to be under the influence of the Holy Spirit; or engage in Holy Ghost dancing, which is an expressive dance after experiencing God on a higher level (Battle, 2006). These actions provide the spiritual experience that gives Black church members strength and encouragement for their daily trials and tribulations. In the Black church experience, language is important. Phrases such as “God is good, All the time and All the time, God is Good” or “Let the church say Amen!” can be heard, which is termed “call and response” (Battle, 2006). These phrases encourage members to be engaged and involved in the service. Furthermore, the Black church preacher’s emotion and passionate expression are key elements of the Black church experience. The pastor holds both spiritual and intellectual power and is tasked with not only encouraging the congregation of followers, but also

making sure the flock has a solid understanding of biblical principles (Harvey, 2011). The Black church serves as a place for Black Christians to gain spiritual sustenance, encouragement, and direction.

In addition to spiritual sustenance, the Black church has served many other purposes in the lives of Black Christians. Historically, Black Christians looked to their faith to guide them through life's challenges. Those who were enslaved relied upon their faith to withstand the difficulties of the time, often using old Negro spirituals to communicate secret directions and codes on how to travel North to escape slavery (Harvey, 2011). During the civil rights era, the Black church was a platform for social change, often spreading the civil rights agenda directly from the pulpit (Battle, 2006). The church served a dual purpose: to gather people together in praise of God and to strengthen a community. A sense of community encompassed the neighborhoods where Black families lived and helped raise, uplift, and protect Black children. In addition, many Black children gained their first education at church, learning to read in Sunday school and learning social skills from church functions. Families and friendships are birthed in the Black church, and these relationships extend beyond the church into other areas of life within the Black family (Rasor & Chapman, 2007).

The Black church also prepares Black students to deal with racist environments. McMickens (2011) defines racism readiness as the preparation of Black students to navigate and negotiate racist people and racist encounters at white institutions. The Black church is a place where congregants can gain the resilience and empowerment to confront racism in other social spaces of a Black person's life.

Black pastors in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century began to preach about social justice and promoted the gospel as a way to liberate oneself from the clutches of racism and oppression (Pinn, 2007). Black students who attend Black churches gain social as well as spiritual development, because they learn not only about connecting with God but also about enduring racism environments. This process reflects the notion of Black theology, whose purpose is to apply the freeing power of the gospel to Black people under white oppression (Cone, 1969, p. 31). An unchanging gospel has traveled down from generation to generation, and it has allowed Black people to confront oppressive environments. The Black church reminds Black students that God is a liberator from white oppression (Cone, 1969).

When Black students plan for college, Black churches support them in the form of scholarships as well as strong encouragement to complete the college degree. Pastors play a major role in the lives of Black families as they perform religious functions for the family, and they frequently hold an influential position in the Black family household. Some Black students who lack a father figure may look to their pastors to fill that role, and the pastor's influence comes with strong power to influence the students' decisions about life. This type of mentorship not only strengthens the relationship between the church and Black children, but also plants a seed of spirituality that will continue to grow (Battle, 2006).

Black males may make the assumption that if they have thrived in a safe Christian environment while growing up, then they can continue to thrive if they attend a Christian college that advertises the same environment. Unfortunately, upon arrival, Black males may discover that the white Christian college environment is

completely different from the Christian experience to which they are accustomed. Much of this is due to the different styles of worship, preaching, and teaching that are influenced by white norms. This chapter presents the case for conducting a scholarly study on the Christian Black male collegiate experience.

### **Christian Institutions of Higher Learning**

According to the U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics (2015), there are about 4,700 degree-granting higher education institutions in the United States of America. Of these institutions, about 1,000 identify as religiously affiliated. The Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCCU), an association of Christian faith-based colleges and universities, published a profile report in 2016 defining the reason for their existence in the higher education system. The CCCCU reports a membership of 181 Christian colleges and universities various denominations. The CCCCU's mission is to advance the cause of Christian higher education and to help its member institutions transform lives by faithfully relating scholarship and service to biblical<sup>5</sup> truth (CCCCU, 2016). In this report, the CCCCU explains that Christian institutions of higher learning have a dual role of educating students and developing students' faith through a firm commitment to the integration of faith and learning. Christian higher education institutions in the United States enroll 1.8 million students each year and remain viable in the higher education industry due to the unique option to integrate faith and learning at the collegiate level (CCCCU, 2016).

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<sup>5</sup> Members of the Christian faith use the Holy Bible to learn about the practices and teachings of Jesus Christ; the most common version of the Bible is the King James Version (Patterson, 2012).

White Christian denominations have struggled with relating to Black people due to the white supremacist colonization of what is now known as the United States. White European Christians sought to create a white Christian nation through genocide and conversion of Native peoples and enslavement of Africans (Fletcher, 2016). White Christians have often been beneficiaries of the privilege that comes with practicing the nation's dominant faith (Blumenfeld, 2006). When describing the traditional, cultural, and religious core of America, its founding can be attributed to white Anglo-Saxon Protestants (Jones, 2016). The colonial United States centered the humanity of white people and marginalized non-white people as essential to its nation-state. McIntosh (1988) refers to the social systems that have resulted as "white privilege." White Christians hold authoritative positions in the Christian hierarchy, which affects the colleges and universities that are operated by certain Christian denominations (Jones, 2016).

Jones (2016) further explains how white Christian denomination leaders have confused racial and social progress because they are blinded by their white supremacy.<sup>6</sup> Due to oppression by white Christian leaders, many Black Christians pursue their own version of denominational power (Blumenfeld, 2006). The Southern Baptist Convention, one of the largest predominantly white Christian denominations in the United States, was historically a big supporter of slavery and segregation. Even though the Southern Baptist Convention released a statement of apology in 1995 for its standpoints on the oppression of Black people, its racist history means that systems of racism likely still operate today at Southern Baptist

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<sup>6</sup> Fletcher (2016) defines white supremacy as the belief that white people are superior to all other races, including Black people, and that, as a result, white people should dominate society.

colleges (Southern Baptist Convention, 1995). Therefore, Southern Baptist colleges might be transmitting racist attitudes to the students who enroll in Southern Baptist colleges.

Denomination leaders originally founded these Baptist institutions to provide a religious education to people who belonged to the Baptist denomination. Yet, over time, that admissions philosophy shifted from students of the Baptist faith to any student seeking a Christian higher education. As Christian higher education in America began to see an increase in minority student enrollment, race relation struggles have played out in Christian colleges and universities (Blumhofer, 2002). Over the years, as higher education evolved as a whole, the needs of the Christian university evolved as well. Guthrie & Noftzger (1992) found that Christian colleges struggled with the governing power that denominations held over the institution's practices, which made it difficult to employ inclusive policies and procedures because of the oppressive and exclusive views of the denomination. As a result, many institutions opted to be affiliated with denominational bodies and no longer subject to the governing authority of denominational leaders because they opted out of the denomination's governance (Guthrie & Noftzger, 1992). When the Christian university changed practices based on secular<sup>7</sup> higher education standards and not based on the denominational standards, tension arose between the university and the denomination (Blumhofer, 2002). Many Christian institutions continue to show respect for their denominational heritage by celebrating a founder's day, which

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<sup>7</sup> "Secular" denotes attitudes, activities, and other practices that have no religious or spiritual basis. Secularism in higher education arose in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when institutions recruited more academicians and fewer faculty from ministry (Woodrow, 2004).

celebrates the patriarchal<sup>8</sup> and racist ancestors who founded the institution.

Additionally, many chapels on these campuses still have the rebel flag in the stained glass windows, which represent the historic racial hatred of America, but also shows the influence that white supremacy had on Christian institutions. As a result, racial oppression and white supremacy continue to endure in the denominational practices that still permeate the Christian campus culture. This creates a white-dominant Christian environment that can affect Black students.

An example of the perpetuation of white Christian norms on campus is the chapel requirement at Christian colleges and universities. Chapel is a major element in the integration of faith and learning. Most Christian schools require chapel as a graduation requirement. Chapel is a mid-week service with praise, worship, a sermon, and prayers. The campus schedule is set up to allow all students, faculty, and staff to attend chapel, as it is a key activity of the Christian higher education campus. These types of functions allow the institution to achieve its spiritual development mission and create a Christian environment. Chapel is a requirement for all students on campus, and white Christian norms dominate. The imagery in the chapel features pictures of a blonde, white, blue-eyed Jesus, and images of other people from the bible also are explicitly white. The music is in the form of rock-and-roll, and the service itself is very streamlined, which is quite different from the Black church norm that includes soulful and emotion-filled music and a focus on the liberating power of God. Furthermore, the chapel sermons focus on a gospel that

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<sup>8</sup> “Patriarchy” refers to male-centered, male-dominated, and male-identified practices within culture. Under patriarchy, the rules of society are built around male needs; reality is seen from male perspectives; and male attributes are seen as most valuable and productive (Becker, 1999).

enhances one's life that is perceived as already good, as opposed to the Black church gospel that liberates from oppression and provides strength through adversity Black Christians rely on that. The white Christian norm rarely allows other types of chapel worship, so white Christian norms dominate, even though the setting professes to be inclusive. Furthermore, when other styles are permitted, like a Black preacher during Black History Month or a woman speaker during Women's History Month, they are viewed as novelty or theatrical entertainment because they are not the norm. Many white Christians deny that this white dominance, saying that they receive no more benefits than anyone else and that all people have the same gospel experience (Schlosser, 2003). When the practices of privileged white Christians is the determinant for how other Christians should learn and grow, it is quite difficult to integrate faith, learning, and the mission of the Christian college. As Black students pursue Christian higher education, they should be aware that the white Christian dominance that determines campus characteristics and culture may not create an environment conducive to their success (Allen, 1992).

Christian higher education institutions have historically failed at being inclusive when it comes to diversity of student body, faculty, and administration. Paredes-Collins (2013) notes that students of minority racial identities constitute only 16% of all students at CCCU member institutions. In addition, it was found that many of the CCCU member institutions lack diversity policies, which means that they lack support, funding, and resources for diversity efforts. Yet diversity efforts are crucially important, because there is a severe disconnect between white religious norms and minority religious norms due to the different ways that the two



groups experience God. Ultimately, a lack of diversity efforts hinders spiritual development for minority students (Paredes-Collins, 2013).

### **Background of the Problem**

This section of the chapter reviews the issues that challenge Black male college students: Black male enrollment and college choice; Black male persistence; and the support measures required to ensure Black male students' success. Black male students are underrepresented in U.S. higher education. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2014), Black males made up 14.7% of the undergraduate student population, whereas white males constituted 60.2%. Among racial/ethnic groups, Black students showed the largest gender disparity, a trend that has persisted for more than 20 years. In 1990, some 61% of Black undergraduates were female and 39 % of Black undergraduates were male. Similarly, in 2013, women accounted for 62% of total Black undergraduate enrollment and Black males accounted for 38%, and the gap between Black female and Black male enrollment was the largest among all racial/ethnic groups (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). Black males are underrepresented in postsecondary education compared to other students of traditional college age, 18 to 24 years old, in the United States. It is common to find that Black males are not enrolling in higher education institutions, and among those who do enroll, many do not persist to graduation. The issue of enrollment of Black males goes beyond access; it includes the challenges of retention and graduation (Strayhorn, Terrell, & Watson, 2010). Only one-third of Black males who start college complete their studies, and their underrepresentation could be related to several different factors (Cuyjet, 2006).

One factor noted by Palmer, Wood, Dancy & Strayhorn (2014) is that Black males enrolled in secondary education tend to lack self-confidence and a sense of belonging, which is related to the lack of diversity among teachers within the K–12 educational system. A second factor is that most Black males enrolled in postsecondary education attend a community college (Palmer, Wood, Dancy & Strayhorn, 2014). Black males who attend a community college may struggle early on and never seek to attend a four-year university, which means they might miss an opportunity to experience the identity development that can take place at a university. Students enter college with multiple social identities, with each marginalized identity requiring inclusion within the university (Cross & Atinde, 2015). The marginalized in college are those students who, because of race, class, gender, geographic location or other identity, are placed on the margin of the mainstream collegiate experience (Cross & Atinde, 2015). The opportunity and ability for students to integrate their ethnic, academic, and social identities may provide them with a sense of belonging during their college years; this is critical to their overall growth and success (Walker & Syed, 2013). For students who arrive with a Christian identity, student affairs personnel should seek to guide them through that identity development process by way of counsel, resources, and opportunities for further growth (A. Astin, H. Astin, & Lindholm, 2011).

Black college students need unwavering support to progress towards graduation, and the most common supports needed from the university are academic, social, emotional, and financial (Herndon & Hirt, 2004). Some Black males enter with academic challenges, and it is often difficult for academic

professionals to help students unpack their challenges and focus on being successful. For example, many Black males receive inadequate education at the primary level and then attend under-resourced colleges. Therefore, it is not surprising that they are likely to struggle with college-level academics (Howard, 2014). This challenge is not their fault; it is the result of an education system that is underfunded and staffed by overwhelmed teachers, so attention to college preparation is largely absent in high school (Howard, 2014). Higher education professionals need to be aware of the academic history that Black males bring to college, because additional academic support is sometimes needed to ensure their success. A focus on academic support in the form of tutoring, academic enrichment, one-on-one relationships with faculty, and realistic enrollment loads is critical for academic success. Those in the role of supporting Black males should seek to develop trust so that when hardships arise, these students have a person they can trust to help them navigate the academic terrain.

Students who enter college go through stages of departure. One stage is separation from past affiliations and past communities, which frequently creates emotional challenges (Tinto, 1988). Emotional support is critical to Black males' success, because they will assuredly experience pressure and stress while in college (Herndon & Hirt, 2004). Black male students also struggle with fitting into the college environment due to issues that create emotional tension and alienation (Chavous, 2000). Black male students arrive at college with complex emotions, bearing the emotional weight of society's negative portrayals of Black men (Cuyet, 1997). Black male persistence in college therefore requires internal self-motivation

and self-determination, which influence students' persistence through emotional and academic challenges (Anumba, 2015). Emotional support can be found formally in counseling centers or informally through peers, faculty, and staff who have built trust with students (Herndon & Hirt, 2004). All students go through transitions while in college and experience stress related to the new environment, places, and people. Anumba (2015) notes that emotional support from peers, faculty, and other college community leaders are instrumental in helping Black males navigate and persist in college.

Social support from the university is important because the success of college students has much to do with students' ability to develop socially (Herndon & Hirt, 2004). Black male students develop their sense of self and social identity from the school curriculum and interaction with peers, teachers, and parents (Davis & Jordan, 1994). Black males frequently come from challenging social situations that may affect how they transition to college. For examples, Black males encounter stereotyping, bias, and isolation in college, along with other social challenges. Additionally, they often do not see other successful Black males unless they are in roles such as janitor or sports coach (Scott, Taylor, & Palmer, 2013). Social challenges can be difficult to navigate as a college student, but those challenges are amplified when students try to succeed in an unfamiliar environment where they rarely see others who look like them. One way that Black males cope with these social challenges in a white environment is to remain connected to the Black community through choices such as where they live, which church they attend, and what relationships they invest in (Bridges, 2011). If the institution fails to address

the issues that plague Black males students' social development, then inevitably these social issues will affect their success.

Financial support is a critical area of concern for Black male students in college; one study showed finances to be the top factor affecting attendance for Black students (Maxey, Lee, & McLure, 1995). Institutions' costs of providing education are met partly by students in the form of tuition and fees, and partly by other funding sources (Price & Sheftall, 2015). At public colleges and universities, state funding covers a portion of the institution's costs. However, as funding support decreases from state governments, the portion that students pay is increasing. Fowles (2014) notes the general trend of a shift in revenue structure away from public appropriations and towards increased reliance on tuition payments. This funding philosophy creates serious and unintended consequences because it shifts a greater financial burden onto students, which means that those lacking strong financial support will be left out of the academy (Fowles, 2014). On average, Black families have lower incomes than their white counterparts do, so potential Black male students may have a harder time being successful in college due to funding limitations (Maxey, Lee, & McLure, 1995). The university must ensure that funding in any form is equitable and accessible to those who need it, so financial education and counseling should accompany financial support, because some Black males may not know the processes required to access financial aid or even the jargon surrounding it. If institutions do not attempt to support Black males by meeting their financial needs, Black male college students ultimately will be priced out of the higher education market (Price & Sheftall, 2015).

Environment is an important part of the transition that Black males experience when they come to college and can be the deciding factor in success (Chavous, 2000). If the campus environment and characteristics do not create the fit needed for Black males, their academic success may be compromised by the energy they must devote to combatting loneliness, alienation, and impostor syndrome (Allen, 1992; Clance & Imes, 1978). Dancy & Jean-Marie (2014) note that feelings of impostorship are perpetuated through various university processes and through the interactions between students and faculty members. Impostor syndrome refers to the feelings that arise when students' feelings of insecurity lead to the sense that they do not belong and cannot perform as well as others (Clance & Imes, 1978). Living in an environment that is not welcoming, inviting, or supportive can cause or exacerbate impostor syndrome. .

A direct connection exists between campus characteristics, campus climate, and the overall success of Black students in college (Allen, 1992). Black male students face many barriers to success in college, including financial difficulties; lack of academic preparation due to under-resourced K-12 schools; and social challenges, especially when entering predominantly white institutions. However, for many Black male students, Christianity is a source of strength that boosts their persistence and perseverance. For this reason, it is worth examining the role of Christianity in Black male students' lives (Strayhorn, Terrell, & Watson, 2010). Black males' experiences at non-Christian institutions have been studied extensively, but little is known about the experiences of Christian Black males attending Christian higher education institutions. Knowing more about the role that

Christianity plays will guide us in developing effective programs to support Black males' academic success.

This study will focus specifically on the Christian identity of Black males, with the understanding that there may be some intersectionality between elements of racial and spiritual identity within the collegiate environment. Furthermore, intersections of race and spiritual identity might have an effect on student success. Black males can be successful with the appropriate support and proper environment (Herndon & Hirt, 2004). It is possible that Christianity serves as a means of support and a mechanism for coping that helps Black male students navigate the college environment (Strayhorn, Terrell, & Watson, 2010). Black male students' challenges have been a topic of many studies in higher education over the years due to their underrepresentation in higher education, but these challenges are understudied for Black males who attend Christian institutions.

### **Research Questions**

Broadly, the research question for this study is: How do Black Christian males experience predominantly white Christian colleges and universities? The sub-questions are: How, and in what ways, do Black males' experiences at these institutions affect their spiritual identity? And what messages about race and gender do they receive from campus religious practices? In order to answer these questions, this study will focus on the lived experiences of Black male students at predominantly white Christian institutions.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The environment at Christian institutions is most often influenced by white religious norms, and this can have a detrimental effect on Christian Black males collegiate success (Blumhofer, 2002). This study's purpose is to examine how the environment of predominantly white Christian colleges and universities affects the experience of Black males. The underrepresentation of Black males in higher education shows that more intentional support is needed to combat the challenges they face daily. Environment is an important part of the transition that Black males experience when they come to college and can be the deciding factor in success (Chavous, 2000). Given the history of white supremacy within Christianity, it is important to examine how Black males in college navigate their racial and Christian identities within an environment that is constructed to suppress them. Furthermore, more research is needed on how Black Christian males experience and achieve success at white Christian colleges and universities. More research on this topic will inform the practice of all higher education practitioners who are involved in the development of Black male college students. In addition, it will inform the practices of Christian institutions that seek to be more inclusive in practice and more engaged in the development of all students, not just white ones. Lastly, it will inform Christian Black male college students about the support or lack thereof that they can expect from the Christian university and empower them to demand a Christian experience that is inclusive of their norms, which is essential to their own development.



### **Significance of the Study**

This study will provide insight into how a Christian college environment affects Black male student success. Christian higher education administrators and student affairs personnel should be aware of these effects because they can influence Black male students' success. The practices of Christian higher education institutions shape student experiences, so this study will shed light on the environments that may impede certain student populations' success. This study will also add to the research literature on Christian higher education, which is largely understudied. Additionally, this study will aid practitioners at all types of institutions who seek to support Black male students. Being mindful of the needs of Black male college students can significantly affect institutional practices. Although this study specifically focuses on Black males, the findings may also be applicable to other student populations pursuing Christian higher education. Black males are an important student population, and serious attention should be given to their recruitment, retention, and graduation. Student affairs professionals tasked with student development, along with the administrators who set campus policy, should ensure access and support for Black males, regardless of whether they are first-year students, upper-level students, or graduate students. In addition, faculty who teach and prepare students for careers or graduate study have a duty to advocate for the success of Black males in college (Cuyjet, 2006).

Understanding the effects of Christian higher education on Black male students will also be beneficial to the religious leaders who work with and have influence over Black males. In addition, there could be potential for partnership

between higher education practitioners and religious leaders who are invested in ensuring the success of Black males. Moreover, this study on the environmental effects on Black males in college could be used to critically analyze the environment of other social institutions that do not have high engagement of Black males.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study will use intersectionality theory as a framework to explore the intersection of racial, gender, and Christian identities and how those intersections affect the Black males' college success. Specifically, this study will explore the experiences of Black Christian males who attend predominantly white Christian colleges and universities by centering an analysis of these institutions as embedding intersecting racist and sexist oppressions. Intersectionality theory was introduced by critical race theorist and Black feminist Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 (Crenshaw, 1991) as a way to critically discuss the experiences of Black women who experienced oppression because of their race and gender (Mitchell, Simmons, & Greyerbiehl, 2014). Intersectionality theory is a critical exploration that examines existing systems of power and complicates how identities intersect with each other (Crenshaw, 1991).

Black male students arrive at college bearing the weight of what it means to be a Black man in a white patriarchal society. In patriarchal culture, all males learn a role that restricts and confines them (hooks, 2004, p. xii). In the Black church, positions and roles often are based on gender, so young Black males raised in a Christian environment may surmise that only men can perform certain roles in the

church. This environment supports and encourages patriarchy and male privilege, and Black male students may come to believe that employing this type of oppression is necessary if they are to become successful. Most social environments support male dominance, and it should be noted that males of all races are privileged through their male identity. Patriarchy operates differently in Black social institutions and white ones, but in both cases, it involves male dominance. According to Chow et al. (1994:15), the family is the primary institution through which patriarchy reproduces itself. If different racial groups in society have different family forms that allocate roles differently, then the structure of patriarchy will vary along racial lines (Ramsaran, 2001).

To be considered a “strong Christian Black man,” young Black males are expected to hold certain roles and avoid other roles that are perceived to be just for women. The Black church perpetuates patriarchy and male privilege even as it promotes men’s Christian identity. In this way, Black men are socialized to oppress Black women within the church environment. It is important to remember that Christianity itself has been used to colonize land and people throughout history, especially during the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, producing a foundation conducive to patriarchy’s growth (Edwards, 2013). Grant (2004) posits that if Black church does not take seriously Black women’s liberation from patriarchy, then it cannot in good faith take any stance on liberation as a whole. With the prevalence of privilege and patriarchy in the Black church, Black women are often referred to as the “backbone” of the church because of the support role to which they have been relegated (Grant, 2004). “Backbone” connotes the importance of Black women in

supporting the church, but it also points to the fact that they function in the background rather than in leadership and decision making (Grant, 2004). Edwards (2013) posits that the Black church is a form of anti-colonial resistance, using the same God and Savior to liberate people. If this is the case, then the Black Church should serve as a place to disrupt patriarchy.

Freire (2018/1968) contends that the oppressors resort to oppressive actions because their only example of human engagement comes through a lens of oppressive human interaction. Black men who are oppressors in their male identities are simultaneously oppressed as Black bodies in a white world. When a Black male decides to attend a Christian institution of higher learning, his identities now are in tension with each other, and he must reconcile what it means to be Black, male, and Christian, all within a white Christian environment. The intersection of disparate identities can lead to tension, conflict, and/or confusion, which may hinder students' development, spiritual growth, and academic success.

Across racialized groups, men receive fewer college degrees than women do, even though women are still underrepresented in certain degree fields (Sax, 2008). Black women students encounter challenges in college, including some that are unique to them and will never be experienced by Black men. However, there is a need to understand intersecting identities of individuals beyond Black women to inform what is known about dismantling systems of oppression (Strayhorn, 2013). Moreover, intersectional support programs such as Black male initiatives are needed to ensure that colleges and universities support Black male identities (Mitchell, Simmons, & Greyerbiehl, 2014). Black men in higher education are often defined as

underachieving and underrepresented due to systematic challenges in higher education (Scott, Taylor, & Palmer, 2013). This unfavorable description is one reason that this study is necessary: to shed light on how Black males experience college and how colleges can support their success.

Because Black males are racially oppressed but also hold an oppressor role with regard to gender, they have a responsibility to disrupt their participation in patriarchy. For this study, Black male college students were selected as the participants in order to examine the oppressor mindset encouraged in Black men by the systems of patriarchal Christian environments. Dancy (2012) notes benevolent patriarchy in which Black men aspire to provide for and protect women, and this aspiration is achieved through attending college where a woman can be identified to “save” and “protect.” In addition, Black male college students were selected in order to give them liberating, empowering knowledge, because they are also racially oppressed and may hold other marginalized identities. Holding multiple identities can be challenging, because intersecting identities are likely to clash or conflict with each other. Schools and colleges are settings infected with endorsements of Black men that are patriarchal, hypermasculine, and hyper-heterosexual (Dancy, 2012, p. 141). Intersectionality as a framework will allow for exploration of intersecting identities, but it also presents a critique that could prompt a real effort towards change and progress in Christian higher education (Mitchell, Simmons, & Greyerbiehl, 2014).

As noted above, it is important to remember that spirituality and religion can be intertwined. Astin, Astin, & Lindholm (2011) defined spiritual identity

development through two separate sets of student qualities, one from a spiritual perspective and the other from a religious perspective. The spiritual qualities described by these researchers are spiritual quest, ethic of caring, ecumenical worldview, charitable involvement, and equanimity, and the five religious qualities are religious commitment, religious conservatism, religious engagement, religious skepticism, and religious struggle (Astin et al., 2011; see chapter two for a fuller discussion of these qualities). This study uses the quality of spiritual quest to examine participants' spiritual development, because spiritual quest focuses on students' development of a spiritual identity and their reliance on spiritual or religious practices to find and strengthen a relationship with God (Astin et al., 2011). Likewise, this study uses the quality of religious commitment to explore students' religious development, because it takes into account the spiritual practices that contribute to spiritual development (Astin et al., 2011).

### **Conclusion**

It is essential to study Black males in college: they are an important part of the student body, but they are not being supported adequately (Cuyjet, 2006). Christian higher education allows people who identify as Christian to pursue their faith while simultaneously obtaining higher education. At the Christian university, if the environment is not conducive to the spiritual growth of Black males due to the promotion of the white Christian norms, then the university has failed. This environment of non-support can create added stress on Black males among the other stresses of being a college student (Herndon, 2003).

The environment at the Christian institution is critical to student success. To ensure Black male students' success, administrators must create an environment that supports their spiritual development through programs and events. Chapel services should be designed to meet the spiritual needs of Black male students. These efforts should not be special initiatives or one-time approaches, but should be ingrained in the institution's culture in order to support Black male students' academic, social, and, most importantly, spiritual success. In the end, the sole focus of the faith and learning integration approach is to develop students who are academically adept and spiritually mature, with a high Christian character, regardless of what color their skin may be (Dockery, 2000).

This chapter has focused on the background of Black male students in higher education, the importance of the Black church in the lives of Black male students, and the influence that the campus environment has on Black males who attend predominantly white Christian universities. This chapter also has established the study's purpose and significance and presented the theoretical framework and the critical lens that will be used to shed light on the intersections of Black male identity development.

Chapter two is a literature review that explores the scholarly literature on Black male undergraduate students' engagement and spiritual identity development. This literature review examines the historical context for Black students' access to U.S. higher education institutions. Additionally, chapter two delves into the scholarly literature on spiritual development in college and the emergence of spiritual development as a valid research topic within the field of higher education.

The literature review subsequently addresses several topics in detail as they relate to Black male college students: faith and spiritual identity, spirituality and the Black church influence, and Black males' success in college. Taken as a whole, this body of literature shows the significance and value of research on how the white Christian environment might impede Black male collegiate success.

Chapter three details the methodology selected for this study, which will follow the hermeneutic phenomenology steps outlined by Max van Manen (1990). The research will use qualitative inquiry to explore the lived experiences of Black males who attend predominantly white Christian institutions. Hermeneutic phenomenology was selected as the methodology because it takes into account people's lived experiences in exploring the meaning behind their experiences (van Manen, 1990). Although these experiences will vary from person to person, they will provide valid insight into Black males' experiences in college.



## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

The purpose of this literature review is to provide research-based background information regarding Black males' experiences at predominantly White Christian institutions (PWCIs). The following topics will be addressed: the historical context of Black students' access to U.S. higher education; spiritual development among college students; the emergence of spiritual development as a valid research topic in the field of higher education; faith and spiritual identity among Black male college students; Black men's spirituality and the Black church influence; Black males' success in college; and Black male student athletes. As a whole, the literature reviewed in this chapter demonstrates the need for research on how the PWCI environment might impede Black male collegiate success.

### **Historical Context for Black Access to U.S. Higher Education**

Dr. Benjamin Mays, who from 1940 until 1967 was President of Morehouse College in Atlanta, penned a strongly worded article about the history of Black colleges and universities in the United States titled "A Look Back at Black Colleges" (1974). In this article, he provides a historical overview of the why, when, and who of Black colleges and universities, which sets the stage for the importance of higher education in the Black community. In the 19th century, many white college presidents and professors supported slavery and the oppression of Black people in U.S. society (Mays, 1974), and most colleges and universities did not admit Black students. Following the Emancipation Proclamation (1865), Black leaders advocated for a way to educate newly freed Blacks in an environment that would be safe for them. To achieve this, Black colleges and universities were

founded, most of them after the Civil war. The Morrill Act of 1862, which granted land for higher education institutions, excluded Black students, but the Morrill Act of 1890 allocated land for higher education institutions for Black students (Mays, 1974). Most of the church-established institutions for Black students were founded between 1865 and the early 1900s to prepare ministers, develop missionaries, and simply give Black students a Christian education (Mays, 1974). The type of education that Black students should receive was debated for many years; some favored vocational training, whereas others favored a liberal arts education. However, church leaders felt strongly that higher education for Black students should be a liberal arts education, which they saw as the best education to prepare students for all areas of life (Mays, 1974). Mays (1974) closes with comments from various Black college leaders across the nation expressing praise for the churches that believed in newly emancipated Blacks enough to create and fund institutions of higher learning for them.

Levy (2011) notes in *Before Brown: The Racial Integration of American Higher Education* that, although the landmark case of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* integrated K-12 public education, it did not resolve issues of access to higher education. Higher education institutions moved very slowly in granting access to Black students, and even when some colleges and universities moved in that direction, Black students still struggled with a racist and oppressive environment. By 1940, one out of every 12 white students in America received some college education, compared to only one out of every 100 Black students, and most Black college students struggled to survive because of the cost, environment,

or other external factors (Levy, 2011). Levy (2011) further highlights several key cases arguing for equal access for Black students, such as *Sipuel v. University of Oklahoma* and *Gaines v. University of Missouri*.

Claerbaut (1976) notes that the turbulent race relations during the 1960's was a catalyst for change at Christian institutions. The civil rights era pushed private PWCIIs—known as elitist, racist, and all-white—to admit Black Christian students, form Black student groups, and hire Black Christian staff (Claerbaut, 1976). Campus life for Black students has always been challenging, but when spirituality and race intersect, campus life can be even more difficult to navigate. According to Claerbaut (1976), the dominance of white student norms created alienation for Black students at PWCIIs. Several themes emerged in his study's recommendations for PWCIIs (1976).

- *Black student recruitment:* Black students made up less than 5% of the predominantly white protestant Christian college student population. Claerbaut recommended that these institutions place more emphasis on recruiting minorities.
- *Black faculty:* The number of Black faculty at Christian institutions was very low and in some cases is zero. Claerbaut pointed out that this could affect Black students because they rarely or never saw professors who looked like them.
- *Black cultural expression:* Claerbaut recommended that opportunities for Black culture expression not be limited to just Black History Month.

This study was conducted in 1976 and is very revealing of the campus life experience for Black students during that time. It is noteworthy, and troubling, that these issues still exist at PWCIIs.

Ash & Schreiner (2016) recently found that many PWCIIs are in the midst of a “racial reconciliation” movement and seeking to offer campus life experiences for minority students that reflect scripture-based acts of love, grace, and mercy. However, this is a challenge because most Christian institutions are structurally not diverse; they struggle with retention and graduation of Black students and have campus environments that perpetuate racism, sexism, and white supremacy (Ash & Schreiner, 2016). Ash & Schreiner (2016) found that, for campus life to improve for Black students, PWCIIs must make an institutional commitment to student welfare, establish pathways to success that are a good fit for the institution and its students, and provide students the ability to thrive. Institutional fit is critical because Black students must feel that “they have a seat at the table” when engaging in their collegiate experience (Ash & Schreiner, 2016). One way for Christian institutions to create a good fit for Black students is to hire more Black faculty. When Black students see faculty who look like them, they feel more comfortable and at ease. Likewise, Black student recruitment is critical to create a student population that not only is only diverse but also reflects society (Ash & Schreiner, 2016). For Black students, “thriving” means having academic, social, and spiritual experiences that promote their ability to persist and graduate (Ash & Schreiner, 2016). If Black students have student organizations, events, and programs that are tailored to them, then they will be more engaged and have a stronger ability to thrive at the Christian

institution. Ash and Schreiner's notion of institutional commitment speaks to Black students' basic need and desire to feel accepted, valued, and respected (Ash & Schreiner, 2016). When PWCIIs support Black students, they not only increase retention, graduation, and overall engagement, but ultimately reflect the gospel of Christ that the institution promotes (Ash & Schreiner, 2016).

### **Frameworks for Spiritual Development in College**

Higher education is meant to be a place for academic and social growth, and it is up to higher education professionals to ensure that this development can take place. Researchers have various definitions of spirituality, and there is no consensus on a common definition; however, an argument can be made that spirituality has religious roots (Estanek, 2006). Spirituality is the process of finding meaning for life and pursuing activities to find that meaning, which helps develop our hopes, dreams, and inner being (Astin, 2004). Spirituality is different from religion, but they can be interrelated, and the practices and rituals of Christianity are found in some forms of spirituality. For this study, spirituality is defined as the pursuit of meaning for one's life and the attempt to discover that meaning, as well as the belief in a connection to a higher power or being, which could potentially express itself through Christianity.

In *Spirituality on Campus: The Emergence of a Post-Secular Age in American Higher Education*, Joseph L. Subbiondo (2011) explains the emergence of spirituality as a topic for research in higher education and the movement toward spirituality development as a goal among student affairs professionals. With this movement, everyone on campus (faculty, staff, and students) can be expected not

only to understand spirituality but also to incorporate it into learning, teaching, and research practices (Subbiondo, 2011). Most of the historic changes within higher education have come from a movement of the students or a complete shift in the way higher education operates, based on serving students' needs while maintaining a commitment to the university's mission. Subbiondo (2011) discusses three areas that could potentially be changed by the movement toward spirituality development in higher education: a) *yourself* – starting with the goal of helping students of all faith identities, higher education personnel need to have a deeper understanding of their own faith (if any) if they are to help students navigate theirs; b) *students* – allowing students to grow in safe environment, whether developing their religious faith or simply learning about spirituality so they have a well-rounded view when they enter adulthood; and c) *profession* – incorporating curriculum and teaching practices that integrate some elements of spirituality, and conducting research on how spirituality intersects with the various academic disciplines. According to Subbiondo (2011), there is a place for spirituality in higher education, and just as with other movements, such as the civil rights movement, spiritual movements can help the university evolve to meet students' needs and the university's mission.

In Fowler's (1981) *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, he draws on the cognitive, psychosocial, and moral philosophies to construct his theory, which defines "faith" and describes six stages of faith development. Although not always religious, faith is a universal human concern, a process by which we give meaning to the many forces and relations of our lives (Fowler, 1981). Fowler's study (1981) was based on a series of 359

interviews that he conducted between 1972 and 1978 with people age 31 to 84, evenly split between men and women. From his findings, he defined six stages of faith development:

1. *intuitive-projective faith*, which begins at the age of two. Young children draw on their parents' or guardian's knowledge to construct the meaning of faith.
2. *mythic-literal faith*, which begins at age 10. The child's faith and beliefs take on a more solid structure. This stage can last beyond adolescence.
3. *synthetic-conventional faith* begins at adolescence; most people at this age shift from "faith as stories" to feeling a part of a faith group.
4. *individuative-reflective faith*, in which individuals began to work out their own belief system and explore their own beliefs rather than relying on others' beliefs.
5. *conjunctive-faith*, in which individuals have their own set of beliefs and recognize others' beliefs.
6. *universalizing faith*, the stage in which one becomes enlightened, recognizes the importance of love, and serves as an activist for justice. Fowler suggests that very few people ever reach this stage; he mentions Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Mother Teresa as examples.

Although Fowler (1981) is widely cited with regard to faith development, his research is most often used as a foundation for the study of spirituality. Sharon

Daloz Parks (2000) expands on Fowler's work to specifically focus on young adults in their college years, covering Fowler's stages three and four. Parks (2000) defines faith as the activity of seeking and discovering comprehensive meaning for one's life experiences. Her model is not broken down into stages; rather, it is multidimensional and includes forms of knowing, forms of dependence, and forms of community. Forms of knowing refers to the ways in which cognitively develop their faith. Forms of dependence pertains to the ways in which student's surroundings develop their faith. Forms of community reflect the social relationships that help build students' faith (Parks, 2000). Parks suggests that higher education institutions can serve as a places of mentoring where students can develop their faith, with professors and other higher education professionals as spiritual guides.

Astin et al. (2011) conducted a study using the College Students' Beliefs and Values Survey and identified five spiritual qualities and five religious qualities that are related to spirituality in higher education. The spiritual qualities are based on a definition of spirituality as the quest to answer life's "big questions" (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011). The five spiritual qualities are spiritual quest, ethic of caring, ecumenical worldview, charitable involvement, and equanimity (Astin et al., 2011).

- *Spiritual quest* refers to an active process of seeking answers to life's questions, turning to spiritual practices or engaging practices in order to find those answers.
- *Ecumenical worldview* means that a student's global worldview transcends ethnocentrism and egocentrism.



- *Ethic of caring* is a sense of compassion for others.
- *Charitable involvement* refers to a lifestyle focused on service to others.
- *Equanimity*, the capacity to maintain a sense of calm and centeredness during times of stress.

The five religious qualities are religious commitment, religious conservatism, religious engagement, religious skepticism, and religious struggle (Astin et al., 2011). These qualities are based on religion, which is defined as a person's commitment to a specific set of beliefs (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011).

- *Religious commitment* is an internal quality that reflects the student's self-evaluation on "religiousness" and the extent to which the student seeks to follow religious practices in everyday life. Students exhibiting the quality of religious commitment find religion to be personally helpful; they gain personal strength by trusting in a higher power.
- *Religious conservatism* reflects the student's relationship with God and their degree of opposition to such things as abortion, casual sex, and atheism.
- *Religious engagement* is an external measure that represents actions that are counter to internal religious commitment actions. This includes behaviors such as attending religious services, praying, religious singing/chanting, and reading sacred texts.

- *Religious skepticism* reflects beliefs that go against religious beliefs, such as “the universe arose by chance” and “in the future, science will be able to explain everything,” as well as disbelief in the notion of life after death.
- *Religious struggle* reflects the extent to which the student feels unsettled about religious matters, disagrees with family about religious matters, feels distant from God, questions their religious beliefs, or feels disillusioned with their religious upbringing.

Students arrive at college not only with the ambition to pursue education, but with a desire to make meaning of their life through a spiritual journey or religious convictions (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011). However, all students also face challenges to both their educational and their spiritual development. Being a Black Christian male does not carry an exemption from the developmental needs that all students have in college. Furthermore, when a Black male student who identifies as Christian chooses to attend a Christian college, he is not exempt from the spiritual, academic, and social challenges that affect Black males in college.

Educating the whole student requires a spiritual development focus that is best achieved by integrating academic and student affairs practices. Spiritual development is critical to student success not only because it helps students navigate college but also because developing the whole student is one of the goals of student affairs professionals (Capeheart-Meningall, 2005). When creating programs and events outside the classroom, consideration should be given to overall student development because students experience multiple development issues, such as

connecting with the community or understanding one's own self-value, and student affairs practices focused on spiritual development can address these kinds of issues (Capeheart-Meningall, 2005). Because student affairs engages students outside the classroom, student affairs administrators encounter students with many different identities and should be prepared to address spiritual identity. The goal and promise of higher education is that students will leave college fully developed and ready to contribute to society, but this can be achieved only if student affairs professionals also address students' spiritual development needs (Capeheart-Meningall, 2005).

### **Black Students, Spirituality, and the Black Church**

McGuire, Cisneros, & McGuire (2017) studied the impact that intersections of identities have on Black students' spirituality. They found that Black students' spirituality influenced their views on heteropatriarchy and patriarchal manhood. Furthermore, Black males' and Black women's spiritual identities often collided with other identities and led to conflict in reconciling one with the other. McGuire, Cisneros, & McGuire (2017) report three findings. First, they found that when students take for granted the morality of religious and spiritual institutions, they do not interrogate aspects that may be potentially problematic or counterproductive for Black students' relationships and their ability to socialize. Black students might have challenges with other identities and not know how spirituality can help them navigate those identities. Secondly, they found that heteronormativity is deeply racialized and that religion, race, gender, and sexuality are interconnected, which could potentially harm Black students, if connectedness is missed. If students do not see the intersection of identities, it might complicate identity development. The final

finding was that there is an incongruence in Black students' commitment to spiritual and/or religious practices. Black students were able to embrace spiritual or religious communities in college and then challenge or rework the religious spaces or practices they feel are racially repressive (McGuire, Cisneros, & McGuire, 2017).

Stewart's (2009) qualitative study found that Black students often struggle to feel comfortable within multiple identities while in college. Stewart interviewed Black college students to find how spiritual identity and spiritual development intersect with other aspects of identity development. Three major themes that emerged from the study. First, Black students viewed their identities as multifaceted, fluid, and dynamic and they were progressive in their views. Second, Black students viewed their identities as coherent and consistent. Last, Black students saw spirituality as the reason why they tried to make synergy among their various identities (McGuire, Cisneros, & McGuire, 2017). They strongly reported that spirituality was connected to all their identities in some way and that they relied on spirituality as a lens in order to navigate other identities while in college (McGuire, Cisneros, & McGuire, 2017).

Park and Millora (2010) studied the role that spirituality and religion play in college students' overall psychological well-being. To address a dearth of research on the influence of spirituality and religion on the psychological well-being of students from different racial groups, Park and Milora included all races in their study and compared findings across racial groups. The researchers noted that Black students often encounter peers and/or faculty who assume they are not academically qualified and experience feelings of isolation, stress, powerlessness, and exclusion,

which can affect their psychological state. Findings from the College Students' Beliefs and Values Survey revealed that Black students struggling with their spirituality have lower levels of well-being. Conversely, Black students engaged in a spiritual quest for meaning had higher levels of well-being (Park & Millora, 2010). Park and Millora (2010) found that, among all the racial groups studied, Black students' well-being during college showed the greatest decrease. However, Black students who arrived at college with a strong spiritual support system (e.g. church, family, friends) maintained higher levels of well-being on average.

Donahoo & Caffey (2010) examined the church's impact on academic performance, retention, engagement of African American college students through interviews with participants from two universities. Quantitative and qualitative analysis of the results showed that church involvement plays an important role in the lives of African American college students and affects their transition to college, with some church members serving as extended family during those transition periods (Donahoo & Caffey, 2010). The study also revealed that church involvement helped students focus and stay committed to earning a degree, and, for some, the church served as a safe haven from the trials and tribulations they endured on campus (Donahoo & Caffey, 2010). Church involvement can not only influence a student's college career but also create opportunities for students to develop spiritually outside of the college campus (Donahoo & Caffey, 2010). Donahoo & Caffey (2010) show that African American students are able to find rest, reassurance, and support when they attend predominantly African American churches, and that this support is critical to their holistic development during

college. Because churches can influence recruitment, retention, academic success, and spiritual development for African American students, colleges and universities should consider building partnerships with churches (Donahoo & Caffey, 2010).

McCray, Grant, and Beachum (2010) examined African American church's role in the life of African American students and its influence on their educational pursuits. The African American church has been an institutional stronghold in Black people's lives and can have a positive influence on African American students (McCray et al., 2010). The researchers posit that African American students bring with them the six cultural capital identities described by Yosso (2005) in her model of cultural wealth.

- *aspirational capital* – the ability to maintain hopes and dreams
- *linguistic capital* – various language and communication skills
- *familial capital* – personal human resources that a student has access to
- *social capital* – the ability to navigate different social situations by using peers/contacts
- *navigational capital* – the ability to navigate social situations
- *resistance capital* – the ability to withstand and fight for equal rights and collective freedom

According to McCray et al. (2010), the African American church can play a major role in African Americans' self-development, which comprises both self-assertion and self-realization, both of which are major identities that students of color possess (McCray et al., 2010). Furthermore, activities that involve mentoring,

community support, and partnership with colleges and universities will prove effective because of the African American church's significant influence on African American students. The African American church holds a place of power in the African American family; it provides spiritual inspiration to confront the challenges of daily life, encouragement to establish resilience, and resources to disrupt the educational disparities that affect African American students (McCray et al., 2010).

### **Black Male Undergraduate Students, Faith, and Spiritual Identity Development**

A study by Wood and Hilton (2012) found that, despite numerous external factors, Black males possess many motivating factors that positively contribute to their higher education experience and overall development. Participants in this study were Black male community college students over the age of 18 with a variety of educational goals (Wood & Hilton, 2012). Data were gathered by interview, journaling, and on-campus observations (Wood & Hilton, 2012). The researchers found that African American males possess multiple internal motivators driving them to adapt to the college environment. One of the most important motivating factors is spirituality, a strong contributor to a student's academic success and overall experience in higher education. Further, they found five themes that explain the ways in which spirituality affects academic success:

- *spirituality served as a confidant.* This describes the experience of participants who spoke about their dialogue with God when dealing with challenges and successes; God fills relational needs that are void.

- *spirituality served as inspiration for excellence.* Participants who fit this theme believed that the pursuit of excellence is an important value of the Christian faith; this message was communicated to them by family members, pastors, and church members.
- *spirituality provided life purpose.* This theme reflects the experiences of participants who spoke about life purpose, often expressing the view that their life and career should serve, glorify, and honor God.
- *spirituality provided an ability to overcome barriers.* When encountering barriers, these participants prayed and believed that God answered their prayers, helping them through whatever challenges they experienced.
- *spirituality reduced relational distractions.* This theme expresses the experience of participants who said that their religious beliefs kept them away from relational distractions such as partying, womanizing, and other destructive behaviors, leaving them better able to focus on their studies.

Similarly, Dancy (2010) focused on the spiritual identity of 24 African American males at 12 different colleges and universities. This study produced three major findings: (1) spirituality is a source of support and dependency; (2) spirituality anchors other identities; and (3) tensions exist between participant's spiritual identity and other identities they hold. The first theme, regarding support and dependency, emerged from participants who expressed how they used spiritual and religious beliefs as powerful coping mechanisms of support for both on and off



campus experiences. The second theme, spirituality as anchor for other identities, emerged from participants who said indicated that they did not know who they were without an understanding of themselves as spiritual or religious beings. Participants reflecting the second theme identified four related areas of on-campus challenges: institutional engagement of African American men according to stereotypes; African American disengagement in interactions with faculty; limited opportunities for mentoring; and limited opportunities to connect with off-campus communities that matter to them (Dancy, 2010). In the third theme, participants expressed feelings about the tensions, crises, confusion, or cognitive dissonance they experienced when their spiritual identity collided with their other identities (Dancy, 2010). Dancy offers implications for the field of student affairs, higher education as a whole, and religious organizations. One of the more pertinent implications is that if institutions ignore religious and spiritual development, they risk excluding Black males who have strong religious and spiritual commitments. Additionally, Dancy suggests that faculty pedagogy matters. Faculty play a major role in the lives of African American male students, so faculty should structure their lessons so students can grow in the classroom by seeking truth. Moreover, colleges should seek opportunities to collaborate with churches and religious organizations because, ultimately, it takes a group effort to recruit, retain, and support African American males (Dancy, 2010).

Riggins, McNeal and Herndon (2008) conducted a grounded theory study to investigate spirituality among 13 African American male students at a predominantly Black university. The study addressed the research question, “Does

spirituality affect African American male college students' ability to stay in school?" The researchers conducted interviews and analyzed their data using open and axial coding. Three major themes emerged from this study: (1) prayer is used for guidance and coping; (2) spirituality is used in a social context; and (3) social support is pulled from religious institutions. The first theme emerged from participants who said that they prayed for guidance when making decisions and used prayer as a way to cope with the collegiate experience (Riggins, McNeal & Herndon, 2008). The second theme emerged from participants who said that they used spirituality to avoid negative temptations and that indicated that spirituality allowed them to connect in community with other African American males (Riggins, McNeal & Herndon, 2008). The third theme emerged from participants who claimed that encouragement and motivation often came from the church they belong to (Riggins, McNeal & Herndon, 2008). Based on these findings, Riggins, McNeal & Herndon (2008) conclude that historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) will be better equipped to support African American males' spiritual identity if they are aware of these themes. However, although spirituality among African American males at HBCUs is important, the research literature does not adequately address the role that spirituality plays in the experiences of African American males at PWCIIs (Riggins, McNeal & Herndon, 2008).

### **Black Male Undergraduates and Success Factors**

Black males have experienced predominantly white campuses in a way that creates alienation, isolation, and an overall sense of stress (Allen, 1992). Research on Black males in college often takes a deficit perspective, starting from the

assumption that Black males are “missing” something (adequate K-12 preparation, sufficient financial resources, etc.), even though every area of higher education has failed to provide appropriate attention to Black male students. Black male student engagement, retention, and success should be at the forefront of academic inquiry due the need to ensure Black males are successful in the academy.

According to Tinto’s (1993) *Model of Institutional Departure*, three sources of student departure are academic difficulty, inability to resolve occupational and educational goals, and failure to be involved in the university’s academic and social life. For students to persist at the university, they need to be engaged in formal (educational performance) and informal (faculty/staff interaction) academic systems, as well as formal (extra-curricular) and informal (peer-group) social systems (Tinto, 1993). Tinto notes that numerous institutions have retention programs, but many are ineffective. To remedy this, he claims that retention programs should be placed above all other institutional objectives. Another factor influencing student success is the institution’s commitment to all students, not just a select group; when the institution is committed to the education of every student, retention can be effective (Tinto, 1993).

Many factors can affect Black male students’ access to and success at PWCIs. Institutional, financial, academic, gender identity, and racial identity factors are detailed below.

### **Institutional Factors**

Harper & Griffin (2010) conducted a phenomenological study using data from the *National Black Male College Achievement Study*, which collected

information about 219 participants attending six different types of institutions. They sought to identify the “enablers” that motivated Black males to overcome barriers to attending college. Many participants reported that others assumed they had been admitted to college due to a “special program” or affirmative action, when in fact the Black male students actually had done the academic work necessary to gain admission (Harper & Griffin, 2010). The enablers included pre-college preparation programs, established cohorts to ensure a peer support system while progressing through college, and significant financial aid packages (Harper & Griffin, 2010). However, even with these enablers in place, institutions of all types experience difficulty recruiting, and access is still hindered for Black males seeking college education.

In *Today’s Urban Black Male: The Importance of Finding the Right College to Realize Maximum Success*, Hilton & Bonner (2017) note that Black males should look for a supportive, nurturing environment when selecting a college. The transition to college means leaving a supportive home environment entering a foreign environment that could hinder their success. Hilton & Bonner (2017) suggest Black males might be more inclined to attend HBCUs rather than other kinds of institutions, because HBCUs are set up to support their success. Black male students can thrive, but it is critical for them to be in an environment that is constructed for them to flourish, not fail, and that means from recruitment efforts until graduation day.

There have been many advances in Black student enrollments over the years, but there are still evangelical and Christian institutions that are highly inhospitable

to Black students (Cross & Slater, 2004). Cross & Slater (2004) examine the enrollment of Black students at evangelical and fundamentalist religious colleges and universities and find that some institutions promote Christian values of love and grace, but are hateful in their admissions and practices. Many institutions are working towards diversifying, but the attempts have only yielded a small percentage of the student body; at most institutions, Black students represent less than 2% of the undergraduate student body (Cross & Slater, 2004). A major reason for this is that most PWCIs still espouse the racial values of the conservative Christian right (Cross & Slater, 2004). A major challenge for PWCIs is that most Black students who seek a Christian education are steered toward or choose HBCUs that have a religious affiliation so that they can avoid the racism and oppression prevalent at PWCIs (Cross & Slater, 2004).

### **Financial Factors**

Price & Sheftall (2015) review institutions' tuition models to explore rising college costs, which can affect Black males' access to and success in higher education. Institutions typically use one of two different models: keep tuition costs relatively low and rely on students to be financially able to pay on their own, or charge high tuition and subsidize the cost for financially needy families (Price & Sheftall, 2015). The challenge is that financial aid packages typically do not keep pace with tuition increases, which ultimately affects the success of Black males who lack financial resources.

Black males typically need financial support to gain access to and achieve success in college. Palmer et al. (2014) noted that financial aid is a critical factor

influencing Black students' success. However, many Black students may not know how to apply for financial aid. Additionally, loan processes can change over time, and Black students may find it hard to find supplemental funds when scholarships are not enough to cover rising tuition. For financial reasons, many Black male students start at a community college or a public HBCU (Palmer et al., 2014).

### **Academic Factors**

Factors affecting Black males' academic success are of compelling interest because two-thirds of Black male students do not earn a degree; their rate of graduation is lowest among all races and both sexes (Strayhorn, 2014). Taking a holistic approach to Black male students' success requires institutions to place a strong emphasis on academics. Strayhorn (2014) used a questionnaire to gather data from 140 Black males who attended large, predominantly white research institutions to explore the role of "grit" in their academic success. The results showed that grit, often defined as perseverance or persistence through difficult circumstances, was positively correlated with academic outcomes such as grades and other achievements, even in the face of challenging situations (Strayhorn, 2013). This suggests that institutions should consider "grit" when building policies, programs, and events to encourage Black male students' academic success. Strayhorn (2013) concludes by pointing out that "grit" is not necessarily the amount of energy invested in a goal, but rather the stamina to persevere, which ultimately can affect Black male academic success.

Robertson & Mason (2008) interviewed 15 Black male undergraduates about what works for their academic success. The study viewed the data through the

lens of Feagin's (1998) theory of cumulative discrimination and posited that discriminatory treatment of Black males reduces their likelihood of academic success and lowers their graduation rates (Robertson & Mason, 2008). The study found that Black males' academic success was connected to aggression, exclusion (including ostracism), dismissal of subculture, and typecasting. The authors conclude with recommendations that center around pre-collegiate programs, social adjustment programs, and cultural course options, all of which will help Black male collegians be more academically successful while in college.

### **Gender/Masculine Identity Factors**

Engaging in campus activities, developing friendships and interpersonal relationships, and seeking help when needed are aspects of healthy development for college men. However, these activities are often viewed as "feminine," so they conflict with the lessons about masculinity that most Black men have internalized (Harris & Harper, 2008). Harris & Harper (2008) have noted several influences affecting the masculine identity of college men.

- *Parents and family.* Parents and family teach boys how to be male. They reinforce societal norms and even apply corrective action when the norm is not acted out. Boys are often taught how to be men by their fathers, and the lessons are often associated with physical strength, rigor, and power (Harris & Harper, 2008)
- *Male peer groups.* Peer groups also influence the masculinity of college males. Men often rely on sports to act out their masculinity. When boys and men are taunted with feminine

names, they often respond by behaving in the masculine ways that the peer group demands. This can prevent them from expressing themselves emotionally (Harris & Harper, 2008)

- *Schools as venues for socialization.* Gender-related lessons reinforce peer and family influences on masculinity. Masculinity is often in conflict for college men as they navigate the roles they have been taught versus the identity they hold (Harris & Harper, 2008).

Studying 24 Black men at 12 different institutions, Dancy (2011) examined the ways in which institutions developed masculine expectations. He noted that Black men at HBCUs felt pressure to live up to stereotypical media portrayals of Black men as rap artists, athletes, and criminals. Participants reported that they believed the Black community valued this level of manhood in these depictions. Three themes emerged from the study:

- *Self-expectations.* The study revealed that respondents built their manhood around self-expectations, with sub-themes of being resilient, being responsible/accountable, and being “real” (Dancy, 2011).
- *Responsibilities and relationships to family.* Respondents were positioned as patriarchs, sons, and brothers. Additionally, enrollment in college allowed them feel engaged and equal to others while also allowing them to find a woman to “save” or “protect” (Dancy, 2011).



- *Worldviews and life philosophies.* Respondents' manhood development was linked to being spiritually/religiously affiliated, shaping a sense of community among other Black students, and being culturally aware of and mistrusting whites (Dancy, 2011).

### **Racial Identity Factors**

Morley (2004) examined how race and ethnicity played a role in how students fit in socially and academically at predominantly white institutions. Morley (2004) interviewed 23 students from minority backgrounds and asked them questions about their pre-college and college experiences related to race and/or ethnicity. The study found that, upon starting college, many participants were concerned about new relationships and navigating the social and academic landscapes (Morley, 2004). Additionally, findings showed that participants were overwhelmed by the size of the university and that they found the orientation programs either "boring" or "not informational" (Morley, 2004). The minority students reported that when they did not fit in socially, they relied heavily on family for encouragement to stick it out and persevere (Morley, 2004). Academically, the minority students reported that college academics were significantly different from what they had experienced in high school, and they found preparation, instruction, and studying to be completely new territory (Morley, 2004). This study also found that, overall, minority students felt isolated and not integrated into the university's academic system. Although many minority students depart from the university without graduating, a substantial number of them remain, and it is not known

whether race and/or ethnicity play a role in their decisions to persist in spite of academic and social issues (Morley, 2004).

After Black males select an institution to attend, they are often confronted with the historic practices of predominantly white institutions (PWIs) that to promote diversity and inclusion but are actually exclusionary in their support practices for students of color. Hotchkins & Dancy (2015) noted that Black males often experience racial “battle fatigue” at the PWI and must employ different persistence strategies in order to be successful. Black male students who choose to attend PWIs also must decide whether they want to engage in campus activities and a campus culture that is not structured to support them. One participant noted that the intersection of his racial and leadership identities was sometimes “draining” because of the image he needed to uphold to avoid negative stereotype reinforcement (Hotchkins & Dancy, 2015). It seems likely that this “draining” feeling also occurs for Black male students with other intersectional identities, not just leadership identities.

Another participant spoke about others’ perception that his achievements were due to his racial identity rather than his merit. According to Hotchkins & Dancy (2015), Black male student leaders at PWIs are often affected by others’ assumptions that Black events, programs, and leaders exist solely to serve Black students and that Black student leaders are placed in their positions because of their race. However, the real reason is that Black students, such as this participant, are smart and intellectual students who work hard to earn leadership positions. This study showed that Black male students use two persistence methods to survive in

leadership positions at PWIs: *reactive invisibility* and *response interest preservation* (Hotchkins & Dancy, 2015). Both methods allow Black male students to cope and persist in leadership positions, which demonstrates the need for PWIs to be cognizant of the types of support they provide to Black males in college.

### **Black Males as College Student Athletes**

Cooper & Cooper (2015) examined the experiences of Black male athletes at Division I historically white institutions (HWI) to better understand the academic performance, academic engagement, and overall quality of the college experience. The study was conducted using a focus group of 10 Black male student athletes at Division I HWIs. The study notes that Black males are persistently overrepresented in collegiate athletics, particularly in football and basketball. It is further noted, that men's football and men's basketball are the highest revenue producing sports on the college campus. Using Role theory as a framework, Cooper & Cooper (2015) found that Black male athletes viewed themselves as the "role model at home, dumb jock at school" with no value placed on their academic success. Another theme that emerged was that Black male athletes saw their athletic ability as a pathway to upward mobility and it provided the means for them to attend college. Lack of relationship with faculty members and no interest in academics was a common theme from the study (Cooper & Cooper, 2015). The last theme was the overall experience at college, and the participants shared "athletics is a business", they are employees who report to an employer (Cooper & Cooper, 2015). Participants noted in the study that they were exchanging time, energy, effort, and athletic ability for a scholarship and opportunity to go to college. Black males arrive at colleges and

universities come for various reasons, but when the reason is for athletics it can be for certain that they are viewed as employees or property, not as students because of the income their bodies can generate.

Agyemang (2010) conducted a study of how Black male athletes understand race and athlete activism in American society and sport. The author noted that today's Black male athlete has to confront overt racism, endure daily physical and verbal abuse, and deal with denial of access to resources and opportunities. The study used exploratory case study design and called for participants who were 1) Black male athletes that had remaining eligibility or exhausted their eligibility within the last two years, and 2) Black male athletes who were willing to still participate after knowing what the study was about. Agyemang (2010) found four themes that emerged from the interviews with the student athletes. First, race/racism is still salient even with the progress made during the civil rights era. One of the participants shared that media and senior level administrators noted that he as a Black male athlete "spoke well", to which the student athlete replied "do they expect me to speak like a monkey". Second, knowledge and awareness emerged, the participants shared they are aware of the current social environment and have knowledge of the prior movements. Third, mindset was theme that emerged, participants noted that today's Black male athlete is not as willing to engage in activism due to a different mindset. Lastly, responsibility, given the other themes the participants shared they should use their social status to speak out about social issues. Agyemang (2010) noted that race has strong implications across the collegiate athletics industry.

## **Conclusion**

This literature review provides research-based background information regarding Black males' experiences at higher education institutions. It explores the scholarly literature on the historical context for Black access to U.S. higher education institutions, starting with the creation of HBCUs in the nineteenth century to address PWIs' failure to enroll Black students. Additionally, this chapter reviewed the scholarly literature on spiritual development among college students and the emergence of spiritual development as a valid research topic within the field of higher education. The literature review also explores in detail several topics related to Black males' college experiences: faith and spiritual identity; spirituality and the Black church influence; Black males' college success, and closing with a review of the literature on Black males as college athletes. This body of literature demonstrates the value of research on Black males' experiences at PWCIIs and the ways in which their experiences affect their spiritual identity development.

## **Chapter Three: Methodology**

Chapter three introduces this study's methodology. The study uses qualitative inquiry to explore the lived experiences of Black males who attend predominantly white Christian institutions (PWCIs). Hermeneutic phenomenology was selected as the methodological approach because it takes into account people's lived experiences in uncovering the meaning behind their experiences (van Manen, 1990). This chapter will provide details on the study's research design, participants, instrumentation, data collection methods, and methods of analysis.

### **Research Questions**

The research question for this study is: How do Black Christian males experience PWCIs? The sub-questions are: How, and in what ways, do Black males' experiences at PWCIs affect their spiritual identity? And what messages about race and gender do they receive from campus religious practices? In order to answer these questions, this study will focus on the lived experiences of Black male students at PWCIs.

### **Methodological Approach**

There are a variety of ways to approach research methodology. A few of the most common approaches rely upon qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods. Qualitative methods seek to ascertain the essential nature of some experience or phenomenon, whereas quantitative methods seek to measure or determine the amount of something. Both have their place in research, but they are employed for different purposes (Berg & Lune, 2011). Qualitative research addresses the meaning, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, and descriptions of

things (Berg & Lune, 2011, p. 3). Quantitative research, on the other hand, addresses the counts and measures of things. Mixed-methods research employs elements of both quantitative and qualitative research (Berg & Lune, 2011). For this study, I will employ a qualitative method known as phenomenology.

Phenomenology is a process by which researchers can understand or find the meaning behind certain experiences (van Manen, 1990). Phenomenology is the study (logos) of phenomena, which can be defined as appearances, or that which shows itself in one's experience or consciousness (van Manen, 2014, p. 60).

Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) is considered to be the founder of phenomenology and is credited with starting the phenomenological movement. Husserl developed the practice of reflecting on and studying the structures of consciousness and the phenomena that exist in consciousness, a process called transcendental phenomenology (van Manen, 2014). Conducting *transcendental* phenomenology requires "bracketing," or setting aside, one's preconceived thoughts or judgments and suspending one's preconceptions (van Manen, 2014). Most phenomenologists look at an experience and try to understand it from a different perspective, but hermeneutic phenomenology allows the researcher to transcend the conscious and go deeper into each layer of the unconscious to uncover meaning. True phenomenology may produce different results each time the same topic is studied, but that is the nature of the studying the "lived experience," because the researcher can see the experience unfold at different points in a person's life (van Manen, 1990).

Hermeneutic phenomenology was expanded by Hans-George Gadamer (1900-2002), who explained that lived experiences are open for interpretation and must undergo analysis in order for meaning to be established (van Manen, 2014). Gadamer (1968) suggests that true understanding comes from viewing information from a specific vantage point based on a relationship between the interpreter and the researcher (van Manen, 2014). Hermeneutic phenomenology is derived from existential phenomenology, but unlike existential phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology rejects the practice of bracketing one's preconceived notions (van Manen, 2014). For this study, I will employ hermeneutic phenomenology specifically because of the rejection of "bracketing," because I believe that the lived experience in its purest form can exist without removal of preconceived notions or feelings.

### **Hermeneutic Phenomenology**

Max van Manen (1990) is a Canadian phenomenologist who posits that we can use a person's lived experiences to gather the information necessary to understand a given phenomenon. In the context of qualitative research, phenomenology is the study of a person's lived experiences (Schwandt, 2007), and hermeneutics is the study or interpretation of a person's behaviors and the deeper meaning behind the person's experience, obtained without bracketing preconceived opinions (van Manen, 2014). The aim of the phenomenological method is to transform lived experiences into a textual expression in a reflective, powerful way that encourages readers to reflect on their own lived experience (van Manen, 1990, p. 36).



The hermeneutic phenomenological method allows the researcher to ask a person about an experience and collect the answers without having to bracket any preconceived notions or opinions. For example, a researcher may interview a person about a certain childhood experience, using detailed questions to prompt the person to reflect on their identity development as a child. This process is the phenomenological aspect of the research. Following the interview, the researcher's reflection, analysis, and interpretation are the hermeneutic process that will help uncover the meaning behind the childhood experiences. By merging the two approaches, the researcher is able to decipher the meaning behind individual's lived experiences.

Van Manen's (1990) human science approach provides the methodology for interpreting consciousness through lived experiences. He introduces six "method structures" for researchers to follow when trying to understand people's lived experiences (van Manen, pp. 30-34). These method structures are detailed below.

1. *Turning to the nature of the lived experience*

Van Manen (1990) suggests that every project of phenomenological inquiry is driven by a commitment to some abiding concern (van Manen, 1990, p. 31). When we see or hear about an intriguing phenomenon, its nature drives us to study and research it in an effort to make some sense of it. However, a phenomenological description is always just one interpretation, and no one single interpretation of human experience will ever eliminate the possibility of another richer or deeper description. In other words, the researcher does not own an exclusive perspective on the phenomenon (van Manen, 1990).

## *2. Investigating experiences as we live them*

We seek to understand a phenomenon by connecting with someone's lived experience (van Manen, 1990). Experiences teach us about ourselves, others, and the life we are living. Phenomenological research requires the researcher to regard the fullness of life, to actively explore all aspects of lived experiences (van Manen, 1990, p.32). According to van Manen (1990), phenomenological research is aimed at establishing a renewed contact with the original experience.

## *3. Reflecting on essential themes*

Van Manen (1990) suggests that an experience by itself gives us little understanding, but reflecting on the experience helps us understand life. Reflection is critical because it allows us to understand our role and others' roles and, ultimately, helps us make sense of why something happened. Unlike any other kind of research, phenomenological research makes a distinction between appearance and essence, between the things we experience and the structures that ground our experiences (van Manen, 1990, p. 32). We can reflectively ask what constitutes the nature of any experience or activity (van Manen, 1990, p. 32). During hermeneutic phenomenological reflection, the researcher seeks to take the experience and translate it into writing and interpretation.

During this process of reflection, themes begin to emerge. For van Manen (1990), themes are used to understand the nature of the lived experience: "Making something of a text or of a lived experience by interpreting its meaning is more accurately a process of insightful invention, discovery or disclosure.... Ultimately, the concept of themes is rather irrelevant and may be considered simply as a means

to get to the notion we are addressing. Research themes give order and control to our research and writing” (p. 79). Van Manen originally (1990) offered four different guides to what he terms “existential reflection.” These are the aspects of experience that should be considered when a person is in the process of reflection: *lived space*, *lived time*, *lived body*, and *lived other*. However, van Manen later (2014) added two additional existential guides: *lived things* and *lived cyborg relations*. These six existential themes, which help us explore meaningful aspects of our lived experiences, are explained below:

- *Spatial reflection (lived space)*. The lived space is where we reflect on the places that make us feel a certain way or where we have certain feelings. Space is not limited to a physical place, nor is it mathematical space with length, height, and depth dimensions (van Manen, 1990, p. 102). Instead, spatial reflection is understanding the meaning behind the space in which we find ourselves, which affects the way we feel. For example, “home” connotes a special space experience that has something to do with our fundamental sense of being; home is where we can *be* what *we are* (van Manen, 1990, p. 102).
- *Temporal reflection (lived time)*. The lived time is subjective and cannot be measured using a clock, because lived time speeds up when we are enjoying ourselves and slows down when we are bored (van Manen, 1990, p. 104). Lived time is our temporal way of being in the world, and the temporal theme allows us to reflect

on how the time was spent, which allows use to consider the past, present, and future aspects of the lived event (van Manen, 1990).

- *Corporeal reflection (lived body)*. The lived body is our physical or bodily presence in the world, through which we simultaneously reveal and conceal aspects of ourselves, not necessarily consciously or deliberately, but indeed often in spite of ourselves (van Manen, 1990, p. 103).
- *Relational reflection (lived other)*. This refers to the lived relations we maintain with others in the interpersonal space that we share with them. Relational reflection allows us to ask how the *self* and *others* are experienced (van Manen, 1990).
- *Material reflection (lived things)*. The material things in our lives and the importance they hold may guide our reflection, revealing how we experience things with respect to the phenomenon being studied. However, “material things” can refer to constructs that are not physical objects – for instance, thoughts, deeds, experiences, events, secrets, and atmosphere. Material things can hold value and our attention based on the value we give them. Questioning materiality may help us gain insight and meaning. Material reflections ask how things are experienced in relationship to the phenomenon (van Manen, 2014).
- *Technology reflection (lived cyborg relations)*. Technology consumes a great deal of our attention in our daily lives. If people

are less inclined to keep up with current trends, they may become overwhelmed by the technology (van Manen, 2014).

4. *Describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting*

Van Manen (1990) suggests that lived experiences must be expressed using language and specifically in writing. The art of writing and rewriting allows the researcher to see the lived experience unfold. This step in the hermeneutic phenomenological process is beneficial because it reveals emerging themes, not just in conversation but in written form as well. Phenomenology is heedful of the propensity to mistake what we say for what we talk about. Phenomenological writing is not found in the colorful words of the storyteller. The words are not the thing being written about, but it is in and through the words that the thing itself, the invisible, shines through and becomes visible (van Manen, 1990, p. 130). Writing thus is a complex process involving rewriting, rethinking, reflecting, and recognizing (van Manen, 1990).

5. *Maintaining a strong and oriented relation.*

According to van Manen (1990), the researcher should remain focused and interested in the research work. It is easy for a researcher to be led astray or lose focus because of the intricacy of the topic or the rigorous work needed to understand a phenomenon. During the process of speaking and writing, researchers should remain mindful of the fact that they are both expressing and creating meaning through the texts they generate. In other words, the text represents their exclusive commitment to the study's topic (van Manen, 1990).

6. *Balancing the research context by considering parts and whole.*

Van Manen (1990, 2014) suggests that one potential pitfall in the hermeneutic phenomenological approach is that researchers can become so involved in one part of the work that they never complete the entire study. Therefore, researchers should occasionally step back, reorganize their thoughts, and renew their commitment to the overall research while keeping in mind the ways that each part contributes to the whole.

### **Researcher Positionality**

As a researcher with ministry training in sermonic preparation who has developed a sermonic voice, I find hermeneutics to be a valuable research approach because it requires a detailed level of reflective analysis to shed light on people's lived experiences. Sermonic preparation encompasses study and understanding of the ministry text and biblical references as well as helping the congregation apply ministry principles to their lives (Olford, 2003). In the art of preaching, hermeneutics is often employed to convey the importance of preached topics. Hermeneutics allows the sermonic voice to be heard and therefore internalized by the receiver, and internalization results in a deeper and more fulfilling message. In this study, my position will be to establish trust with the participants in order to gain the information necessary to understand their lived experiences. Creating trust will help me convince participants that their confidentiality will be maintained and that my study will respect their lives and their experiences. In addition, it will foster a greater level of comfort with the process so that participants feel free share more information as the study progresses, or to withdraw from the study if they so choose.

I identify as a Black heterosexual Christian male from the Midwest. I am married to a Black woman and I am the father of four Black boys ranging in age from four months to ten years. My spiritual identity was influenced by being the grandson of a pastor and the son of a deacon, a biblical church officer who helps the pastor serve the congregation's needs. When I was growing up, Christianity was the central focus of my family, and this is true of my family today as well. Additionally, I am a licensed and ordained Christian minister serving as a co-pastor at a predominantly Black Christian church. Although I did not attend a Christian university, I relied heavily on my faith during my attendance at a public regional university as an undergraduate. As I navigated different social situations and worked through different identity processes, my Christian faith was a consistent foundation that helped me understand myself as Black male student and also helped me understand college life. During my undergraduate years, I questioned elements of my Christian faith to confirm that my beliefs and practices resulted from my own commitment, not from the commitments of my parents or others who influenced my life. As the researcher in this study, I must ensure that I do not project my own personal background onto my participants' experiences. It is of utmost importance that I focus on the students' experiences and the ways in which the information they share with me might change institutional practices. And yet my background is relevant to the study, and I expect that disclosing my background with the participants will help establish trust and foster an atmosphere that makes them feel comfortable sharing their experiences. I hope my background will help in

establishing trust and help participants feel more comfortable sharing their experiences.

Considering my positionality, my identities, and the participants' environment, I must make sure to check my privilege in the research process (Dancy, 2012). Dancy (2012) offers a checklist for undoing homogeneity in qualitative research on Black men, and these steps "[help] the researcher check personal bias and assumptions that could potentially affect the participants' trust and the research outcomes" (Bates, 2017, p. 50). Bates (2017) provides a helpful summary of Dancy's checklist, shown below. (Dancy's sixth step is "re-envision the pilot study"; because this study was not preceded by a pilot study, the sixth step is not included below).

- 1. Identify subject positions and locations.* Researchers must see themselves clearly, acknowledging their authentic identities. Additionally, researchers should locate the roles they inhabit and take note of ways in which these empower and/or disenfranchise.
- 2. Push paradigmatic knowledge and methodological flexibility.* It is vital to understand the peculiar dualistic socialization of Black males in being oppressed and also serving as the oppressor.
- 3. Intersect qualitative methodologies in research about identity intersections to maximize data analysis.* Approaching fieldwork without being constrained by predetermined categories of analysis contributes to the depth, openness, and detail of the behavioral context.



*4. Keep close to the data in the analysis.* Researchers should code closely to the raw data to fully capture participant truths.

*5. Auditors and peer debriefers are critical.* Peer debriefers may challenge all aspects of the research design, including conceptual and theoretical frames, institutional site selections, participant selection, and methodology. Auditors review the data, methodology, and analytical documents for consistency and applicability, and offer feedback, suggestions, and confirmations.

(Bates, 2017)

Dancy's (2012) checklist provides a sound way to ensure that I, as a researcher, unpack my own lived experiences and acknowledge my assumptions, privileges, and biases.

### **Site Selection**

Faith University is the pseudonym of a small, private, Christian liberal arts university located in the Midwestern region of the United States. The institution was founded by the Southern Baptist Convention in 1910 and does not deny access to anyone who identifies as Christian. However, most of the practices still align closely with Southern Baptist doctrines. The Southern Baptist Convention, one of the largest predominantly white Christian denominations in the United States, historically supported slavery and segregation. Although the convention in 1995 released a statement of apology for their standpoints on the oppression of Black people (Southern Baptist Convention, 1995), its race-oppressive history may affect

the Black male students enrolled at Faith University due to the systems of racism that may still be in place today.

Faith University has a total student population of 2,093 (Fall, 2017), and less than 5% of students are Black males. Faith University offers undergraduate degrees in arts and humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, religion, and business. Faith University takes pride in its ability to integrate faith and learning, and it is well known for its athletic programs. Faith University was selected as the site of this study due to its designation as a Christian university.

### **Sampling**

The 12 participants for the study are Black undergraduate students between 18 and 24 years of age who identify as Christian. These 12 students represent 10% of the university's Black male population of 114. I selected participants using purposeful sampling, which means selecting participants from a particular demographic who meet a particular research need (Schwandt, 2007). I emailed students, colleagues, and departments to ask for suggestions of potential participants. Purposeful sampling allows for a more in-depth understanding about their experiences and a greater ability to obtain the information needed from a smaller sample. I also employed snowball sampling, which means relying on referrals from participants for others who might consider participating. When sample, phenomenologists should seek out participants who are likely to provide rich, powerful accounts of their experiences, which help the researcher create a scholarly, reflective text (van Maned, 1990). Additionally, criterion sampling was employed in order to recruit Black male participants who attended a Black church

prior to college and/or are involved in athletics at the college level. This allowed for analysis of how the Black church prepares Black males for PWCIIs and how spirituality affects Black male athletes.

### **Data Collection**

Participants were interviewed for one hour in a closed-room meeting space on campus. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured format in order to collect information using open-ended questions that served as topics for further discussion (Jones, Torres, & Arminio 2014). Demographic questions were used to open the discussion; a demographic form was used to gather basic information prior to the interview. The demographic form included questions related to strength of spirituality, importance of attendance at religious services, and importance of being connected to a religious community. These questions were developed by using the Daily Spiritual Experience Scale (Underwood & Teresi, 2002) as a guide, and the questions were built using a Likert-type scale: very important/very strong, slightly important/slightly strong, and not very important/not very strong. Since these questions were asked prior to the interview, this data allowed for me to understand the level of spiritual engagement and practice of the participants prior to data analysis of the full interview.

Open discussion of topics and emotions were encouraged in an effort to understand the participant's experience. During the interviews, I took notes by hand and also audio-recorded the interviews to make sure my notes accurately reflected what the participant said. In addition, I asked clarifying questions to ensure that my

understanding of the participant's response was correct (Schwandt, 2007). The interview questions are listed below:

1. Did you attend church as a child or adolescent?
2. Did you attend a predominantly Black church?
3. As a child/adolescent, how involved in church were you?
4. Do you attend chapel regularly here on campus? Why or why not? Do you feel you belong there? Why or why not?
5. How important was your childhood pastor in your life?
6. How important were other church leaders?
7. How important was the church body in your life?
8. How important is attending church to you?
9. Describe your experience as a Black male student. We can start with one identity. What does it mean to be Black at Faith University? What does it mean to be a Black man here? What other aspects of your identity matter to you as a Black male college student? Can you give me examples of your other identities? (For example, ability, sexual orientation, class.)
10. As a Black student here at Faith University, have you faced any issues such as discrimination; feeling unwelcome at activities or events; or lack of support for your spiritual, social, or academic development?
11. What helped you get through negative or challenging issues you have experienced?

12. What role does faith play for you while in college?
13. How do you practice your Christianity while in school?
14. Do you feel that more can be done to help Black males develop Christian identity? What? Why (if needed)?
15. Do you feel connected to Christians of different races on campus? If so, in what ways? If not, why not?
16. How would you describe your experience in the classroom? Do you feel welcomed or like you belong?
17. How would you describe your experience at weekly chapel service or any other spiritual life chapel service?
18. Have your interactions with your professors been positive or negative? Please explain.
19. Do you participate in co-curricular groups or organizations? If so, do you feel welcomed or like you belong?
20. Are you involved in any spiritual life student events or activities? (For example, Welcome Week, Bible study, mission trips, and so forth.)
21. Do you have any strong relationships or friendships with your classmates, roommates, or other students on campus?

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis was conducted using phenomenology and hermeneutic philosophical principles. I used hermeneutic phenomenology (van Manen, 1990) to synthesize the data using thematic analysis, existentials as guides to reflection, and

hermeneutic phenomenological writing. In the process of data analysis, I looked for and decoded themes that were critical in the hermeneutic process, because the themes may hold the meaning behind the lived experience.

Van Manen suggests three different ways to analyze themes: the holistic or sententious approach, the selective or highlighting approach, and the detailed or line-by-line approach. In the holistic approach, the researcher attends to the whole text and asks, “what sententious phrase may capture the fundamental meaning?” (van Manen, 1990, p. 93). In selective approach, the researcher looks for meaning by listening to and reading the text several times, asking, “what statements or phrases seem essential or revealing?” (van Manen, 1990, p. 93). In the detailed approach, the researcher reviews every word and continuously asks, “what does this sentence or sentence cluster reveal?” (van Manen, 1990, p. 93). For this study, I used the holistic and selective thematic analysis process to understand the themes. My goal was to be able to examine the whole text and become mindful of its themes, while using the selective approach when themes emerge that require individual analysis.

Next, I “peeled back the layers” of the experiences to find the meaning and fully understand the lived experience using van Manen’s six existential guides: spatial (lived space), temporal (lived time), relational (lived other), corporeal (lived body), material (lived things), and technological (lived cyborg) (van Manen, 1990; van Manen, 2014). For example, asking a question about where the participant grew up allowed me to review *lived space* by examining the home the person grew up in, the town it was located in, and the experiences that occurred in that particular space.

I examined *lived time* by asking about how long the person lived there and the age at which they recall various experiences happening in the home. I explored *lived other* through questions about who was part of their household, which friends and family members visited, and what experiences they may have had with other people. I addressed *lived body* by asking about how they felt growing up in that particular house, with their family members, with their unique experiences. I investigated *lived things* through the participant's discussion of the materials items to which they have a connection. And I probed *lived cyborg* through conversations about the role of technology in the participant's experiences. However, simply interviewing and writing does not complete the hermeneutic process; it is necessary to "peel back the layers" and reflect to gain phenomenological insight (van Manen, 1990). The focus must be on the participant's experience and all of the thoughts and emotions that surround it.

The hermeneutic phenomenological writing process is critical because it allows the research to see the participants' experiences come to life and offer meaning. This does not always happen immediately, but the process of writing and re-writing allows the researcher to see what themes emerge and then put these themes into words, which ultimately gives meaning to the experiences (van Manen, 1990). Phenomenology requires a back-and-forth movement, and the in-depth writing cannot be accomplished in one straightforward session (van Manen, 1990, p. 131). I used reflective field notes to ensure that my personal biases did not enter into my writing and to maintain the integrity of the study by writing exactly what the participants expressed. Following the interviews, I transcribed the audio recordings

and compared the transcripts to my hand-written notes. While writing, I looked for themes and followed a writing process of writing once, then reflecting, then re-writing. In keeping with the hermeneutic process, I gave myself time, rather than attempting to rush the process of writing and reflecting, so that I could allow the “lived experience” of being a researcher to take place.

### **Trustworthiness**

In order to ensure trustworthiness, I used reflective notes and triangulation to ensure reliability and validity. Triangulation refers to the process of verifying data by gathering it using multiple techniques. I worked to ensure that I accurately reported what participants said during the interview, while recording responses, I asked clarifying questions to prompt participants to explain their answers in greater detail. In addition, I used an audit trail and kept all notes, recordings, and materials related to the study to ensure that every part of the study can be documented and verified. I also used member checking, allowing the participant to review findings near the end of data collection in order to limit bias from the researcher and dismantle the imbalance of power between the researcher and participant (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

### **Institutional Review Board Process**

The University of Oklahoma Institutional Review Board (OU IRB) exists to safeguard the rights and welfare of human subjects. This study’s proposal received approval from the OU IRB in March of 2018 under IRB proposal number 9120.



## **Limitations**

Many religious colleges and universities do not enroll a large number of Black males. In addition, most religious universities have an affiliation or partnership with a specific denomination, and different denominational influences may affect the institution's approach to the integration of faith and learning. For both of these reasons, this study's findings might not be applicable to all Christian colleges and universities. Another possible limitation of this study is that participants may have felt inhibited from fully sharing their feelings during the interviews due to fear of reprisal by the institutions or others

## **Conclusion**

This study allowed me to address the research question: How do Black Christian males experience predominantly white Christian colleges and universities? Furthermore, using hermeneutic phenomenology, I was able to answer the two sub-questions: How, and in what ways, do Black male's experiences at PWCIs affect their spiritual identity? And what messages about race and gender do they receive from campus religious practices? Using hermeneutic phenomenology as the methodology enabled me to explore the lived experiences of Black male college students who identify as Christian. Through a semi-structured format, I was able to gather data through open-ended interview questions, which helped me understand the participants' lived experiences. In the following chapters, I detail the data analysis I conducted using hermeneutic phenomenological guides within the framework of intersectionality, which helped me discover the emergent themes.

## Chapter Four: Participant Introductions

This chapter presents the data generated by the interviews described in chapter three. The interviews were transcribed and, based on the researcher's interpretive analysis, presented using van Manen's (1990, 2014) templates within the context of the six existential life-worlds: relationality (lived self-other), corporeality (lived body), spatiality (lived space), temporality (lived time), materiality (lived things), and technology (lived cyborg relations). All participants embraced the guide *Technology (lived cyborg relations)*: they all had cell phones and expressed involvement with social media. Some of them placed information about the study in a GroupMe chat involving all of the Black students on campus; this group, I learned, is how they stay connected as Black students regarding campus events, class information, and supporting each other.

Participants shared various reasons for choosing Faith University as a place to attend for higher education. Those that were athletes, spoke about the opportunity to play versus at other schools, along with the financial support from athletics to pay the cost to attend. The participants who were not athletes spoke about the academics at the university, and the ability to get a strong credible academic degree from the university. Other participants shared they selected Faith University because family felt that the university would provide a good Christian education.

Twelve Black male students at Faith University participated in the interviews. Their college classification ranged from freshman to senior, and their ages ranged from 18 to 24 years. All participants reported that they identify as Black or African American. One participant reported Hispanic or Latino identity in

addition to Black or African American, and another reported American Indian or Alaska Native identity in addition to Black or African American. All participants identify as Christian, with several different denominations represented, including Baptist, Church of Christ, and non-denominational.

In this chapter, I present vignettes to introduce readers to the participants. I maintained participants' confidentiality by using pseudonyms, assigning each participant the name of a biblical figure whose personality traits matched the participant's characteristics in some way. Much like their biblical namesakes, each participant is on a spiritual journey toward God from their own unique perspective. To protect their identity and maintain anonymity, the participants' responses were edited to remove any identifying information, so that each story would retain the participant's unique voice in its purest form. The following chart displays the participants' demographics.

| Name     | What is your age? | Grade Classification | Racial or Ethnic Identity                | Family Yearly Income | Grew up attending at Black Church |
|----------|-------------------|----------------------|--|----------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Peter    | 21                | Junior               | Black/AA                                 | N/A                  | Yes                               |
| John     | 21                | Sophomore            | Black/AA                                 | Greater than \$100K  | Yes                               |
| Mark     | 21                | Junior               | Black/AA                                 | \$90K-\$100K         | Yes                               |
| Moses    | 20                | Sophomore            | Black/AA                                 | N/A                  | No                                |
| Luke     | 18                | Freshman             | Black/AA                                 | \$70K-\$80K          | Yes                               |
| Matthew  | 18                | Freshman             | Black/AA                                 | Less than \$60K      | Yes                               |
| David    | 23                | Senior               | Black/AA                                 | N/A                  | Yes                               |
| Thomas   | 19                | Sophomore            | Black/AA                                 | N/A                  | Yes                               |
| Paul     | 22                | Senior               | Black/AA                                 | Greater than \$100K  | Yes                               |
| Barnabas | 18                | Freshman             | Black/AA & Hispanic/Latino               | Greater than \$100K  | Yes                               |
| Jonah    | 23                | Junior               | Black/AA                                 | Less than \$60K      | Yes                               |
| Titus    | 18                | Freshman             | Black/AA & American Indian/Alaska Native | Less than \$60K      | No                                |

**Chart 1. Participants' Demographic Information**

### **Phenomenological Narratives:**

#### **Peter (the Disciple, the Rock)**

**Relationality reflection (lived self-other).** Peter is a junior from a state several hundred miles from Faith University. A member of the football team, Peter came to Faith University mainly to play football. Peter grew up attending a multicultural church that had more Black members than members of any other race. Peter said that he did not understand the importance of spirituality until he was in college. Peter feels that his spirituality is slightly strong, that it is slightly important

to attend religious services, and that it is slightly important to be connected to a religious community.

Peter shared:

I feel my belief in God has helped me get through some tough times, and believing is important because it keeps you strong mentally, and keeps you close to God who can help you through anything.

**Corporeality reflection (lived body).** When we met, Peter was wearing team-issued football attire from the Faith University athletic department. As we talked, Peter was very forthcoming with answers, and he took his time to think through the questions before he answered them. Peter was excited to tell me that he is getting playing time this year and that he has found a community by being on the football team.

**Spatiality reflection (lived space).** Peter wanted to conduct the interview in the library because he needed some resources for studying. When I asked him about attending chapel, Peter said that it is not what he is used to, so it takes some time for him to feel connected to the service.

Peter shared:

I have no real connection to chapel, I attend because it is a requirement. Most of my strength comes from individual prayer, bible study, and going to church on my own.

Peter was very laid back and very cooperative during the interview process. He mentioned that the chapel requirement is connected to his experience on the football team, because the coaches are alerted when the football players do not attend.

Peter shared:

Since it is a requirement, I try to go so the coaches do not get alerted that I have not been going, but if it was not a requirement I would not go. All my

spiritual stuff comes from things I do on my own, even in chapel, most of the football team sits together and we just there to get the credit.

### **Mark (the Disciple, the Suffering Servant)**

**Relationality reflection (lived self-other).** Mark is junior who was raised in the suburbs. He attended a Black church when he was a child, but after his father received a promotion at his job, the family moved and joined a white church. Mark said that after a few years of attending the white church, he noticed the differences between the Black church and the white church. Mark is a student-athlete on the football team, but he spoke more about his experiences as Black male student and a Christian than about being on the football team. In fact, Mark did not even mention athletics until the end of the interview. He said he feels that his spirituality is slightly strong, that it is very important to attend religious services, and that it is slightly important to be connected to a religious community. Mark reported that his childhood pastor was a very important figure in his life.

Mark shared:

My pastor was very important. He checked on my family often. I grew up doing AWANA [youth discipleship program]. My pastor was a part of that and he would always make sure we were doing well, making sure we were learning diversity and everything like that, which pertains to life.

When asked about his experiences as a Black male on a predominantly white

Christian campus, Mark shared the following:

At first, I had a lot of friends that were from predominately Black areas, and they used to complain about their experiences here at Faith University, and I never really kind of understood, until I really started hanging out with them more. It's my junior year now, and I kind of understand where they're coming from now. It's tough out here. I'd say just seeing how people's body language and how just different things are said or how they interact with Black students here is very different.

Mark shared that the body language is as if people are ignoring him or like he is invisible. Mark then discussed his faith and how he has navigated the challenges of being a Black male at Faith University. Mark paused for a moment to think, and then shared the following when asked “What has helped you get through negative or challenging issues here at Faith University?”

Mark shared:

My father grew up in the same, in the more predominately white side of town, so he dealt with a lot of stuff back in the day, so I just always ask him if I had any issues or had any struggles, “How did you go through it? What did you do?” So he always told me, “Just pray to the Lord.” And then how he also personally dealt with it. That’s how I got through a lot of my problems, or still am.”

When asked about the role of his faith in his collegiate experience, he shared:

It plays a big role, but I’m not going to pretend like I have the best relationship with the Lord right now. But, I believe that the Lord sets you up for opportunities and even though you can’t see him, even though you can’t see his works, they do happen. I believe faith is a big part ’cause he’s helped me out a lot.

**Spatiality reflection (lived space).** Mark met me in an empty student services office. When asked about whether chapel was a culture shock, Mark shared:

Not really, because, so I went to a predominately Black church growing up and then moved out to a predominantly white area and a white church, so kind of like my high school and just middle school years was kind of like being here at Faith, predominantly white, so I was already prepared for what to expect.

I asked Mark to describe the feelings and images that came to mind when he thought about being in chapel or other spiritual services on campus.

Mark shared:

I wish there was more gospel music and everything. But I feel, I remember we had a chapel service last semester, and we had an African American speaker, and normally in chapel, everyone's just has a lack of respect and whatnot, and it seemed like they switched, when he was speaking. He told us to stand up for, or he didn't tell us stand up, I don't know, he either told us to stand up for the word or not, but everyone just started to stand up, but no one ever stands up for when there's regular chapel service. I was kind of irritated then, because I was like wondering, "What's the difference of an African American speaker and a white pastor?" It just frustrated me because they treated him differently and I was just thinking. But that's the only negative thing I've ever had with chapel service. I just wish we had more diversity in the music, too. We do have gospel music, every now and then, but it's like once every three months, maybe, and a semester's three months.

Mark also shared some thoughts regarding his major and what it means to be a Black male at a white Christian university.

What it means to be Black here is special. I like, I try to look at it as a positive way, at the same time. It has some negative ways, but there's not too many Black people here and plus this is a very prestigious school and so I feel honored to be here and I feel honored to be in the business programs here because, for one, I'm also a Black athlete. People just expect me to be in some easy major where I just, I can roll through four years. Where I'm actually trying to learn, so I really think it's special being Black here. As a Black male, it's also, it's just a special opportunity.

Mark was excited to participate in the interview and very willing to offer any support for the study going forward. Additionally, Mark suggested that the study is much needed, because he sometimes wondered about who is leading the effort to support all students.

### **John (the Disciple, the Beloved One)**

**Relationality reflection (lived self-other).** John is a sophomore who plays football; he is very laid back. He is a friend and teammate of Mark's. John has a very quiet demeanor and meek personality. John feels that his spirituality is very strong, that it is very important to attend religious services, and that it is slightly



important to be connected to a religious community. John reported that he came to Faith University only because of the athletics, but since arriving on campus, he has become more focused on his spiritual development.

John shared:

It was athletics that brought me here and the teammates, but ever since I been here, my faith has become more important than athletics or academics. It would be faith, academics, and then athletics if I have to put them in order.

**Corporeality reflection (lived body).** John was wearing team-issued football attire from the Faith University athletic department. As we talked, John was generally very forthcoming, but he struggled to answer some of the interview questions. Because John is on the football team, he does not have much control over his schedule. Between classes and practice, it can be a challenge for him to find time for other activities.

John shared:

I do miss out on other activities on campus, because of my schedule with working out and practice. Some of the stuff I miss, yes, but I do enjoy athletics.

**Technology (lived cyborg relations).** John repeatedly checked his phone during the interview. He was engaged in the interview part of the time, but at other times, he was distracted by his phone. I was aware that enrollment was opening soon, so it is quite possible that he was concerned about signing up for classes.

**Luke (the Disciple, the Great Physician)**

**Relationality reflection (lived self-other).** Luke is freshman in his second semester at Faith University. I met him in a local eatery getting food before class, and he agreed to meet with me and share his experiences. Luke is settling into

college, but he has already noticed that some things are very different here, and he is forthcoming about his experiences. He feels that his spirituality is very strong, that it is very important to attend religious services, and that it is very important to be connected to a religious community. Luke grew up attending a predominantly Black church. His family moved to a white church for a time, but they went back to the Black church because they missed the Black church experience and because they felt excluded by the white church's cliquishness.

Luke shared:

From about age 4, to, I'd say, maybe 13 to 15, in that range, I was cool with it, until I started wanting to go back to the Black church, because I felt a little off in that church. I would go to church. I would sit in there. I would smile at people, I would be nice, nobody would talk to me. It was really clique-y. Everybody was really staying to themselves, and the majority of the time, I was the only African American male in the whole youth group, and just, in general, really, I didn't see many African Americans. I would go back to the Black church, as well as, my father and I, we searched for another church to go to but we just went back to the Black church.

Luke also mentioned that, because he was accustomed to attending a white church, chapel is not a struggle for him as it is for many other Black males. Even so, Luke reported that he still "felt off" when in chapel.

Luke shared:

A preacher that gets real expressive, and into it, and so, sometimes, when you go into chapel, it's kind of different. So it's kind of like, "Oh, man, this is kind of off." When certain things are said, I feel off, because I think they can be misconstrued in some aspects. But most of the time, I'm prepared, because I've kind of had both experiences. Yeah. So it's not like, I'm coming into this, "Whoa, this is totally new to me."

**Spatiality reflection (lived space).** In talking about his experiences as a Black male at a predominantly white Christian institution (PWCI), Luke provided a lot of detail about his encounters at various places across campus.

Luke shared:

There are just some instances where I'll be playing a sport, or something, and someone will say something out of hand. I recall being called dumb, because I am African American. I recall having racial slurs thrown in me, thrown at me as a joke.

Just recently, actually, I was doing a swimming workout for crossfit, and I can swim well, but for some reason, I wasn't doing it the proper way, in some people's minds, and a boy felt inclined to say, "Oh, well, at least you're living up to the stereotypes of being African American, and not being able to swim."

Luke then discussed how people sometimes hide behind the identity of Christianity, and as we talked, I asked whether he was surprised at the behaviors or attitudes he encountered from people at a place that explicitly endorses Christian values.

Luke responded:

Not at all. I grew up with people claiming that they were Christians, and were very prejudiced, so....

I then asked Luke how he handles these sorts of challenges and where he finds support or resolve them to help him in these situations.

Luke shared:

It was mainly the Black church where I got that resolve, and support, because they knew that I was coming here. It was mostly coming from my father. He was telling me that this is a different church, this is a Christian college, but that doesn't mean that you'll still not encounter some struggles. So, due to my father and mother jointly helping me with that, and my grandparents, as well, and just the whole African American church community praying for me, and encouraging me, I've been able to get along. As well as Dr. Jones and his wife being helpful in that aspect. [Dr. Jones, a Black man, is Theology professor at Faith University. He and his wife, a Black woman, are informal mentors to several Black students at Faith University.]

When we discussed chapel, Luke expressed some strong feelings about his experiences, especially his feeling that he did not belong.

Luke shared:

I feel like, most students here experience a culture shock every time an African American pastor comes in, because they're not here that often, for one, and for two, it's not fair, in my opinion, that we don't get to experience that more often, what we're used to, because they want to keep it in a safe bubble.

At times, I feel like ... Well, most of the time, it's hard for me to get into it. I don't really feel too included in worship, because, a lot of these songs, I've never heard before. And the ones that I do know, and I don't know well.

Not being able to know it, and then, not singing the songs that really speak to just people, in general, it's hard for me. I feel left out, because, just, some of these songs are on just on a whole different spectrum.

And looking around, and seeing people just, doing what they do, I guess. I'm not really accustomed to seeing all the swaying, and the hands up, and all that. All that's like, even being in a white church [as a child], I still, really, never got caught into that.

**Temporality (lived time).** Luke said that he sees a Black preacher in chapel only during Black History Month or when the gospel choir sings. The gospel choir, which consists mainly of Black students, is allowed to sing only during special occasions. It is not seen as a mainstream student organization, unlike the university's predominantly white choirs, which are encouraged to be part of the chapel service as often as they like.

Luke shared:

As opposed to the other kind of musical selections, the gospel choir kind of takes you back a little bit, and makes you comfortable, because I know the stuff. It's what I grew up on. Personally, I don't like the fact that the only time we can get an African American pastor here is when the gospel choir sings, and the gospel choir doesn't sing that often.

Luke then talked about his experiences in the classroom.

Luke shared:

I've only had maybe three professors that it's been negative with. One of them would ... The way I saw it, she was just throwing prejudice against the African American students in the class. I had my hood on in her class, and she said to me, "I don't allow hats or hoods in my class," when there are two other women of the Caucasian and Asian race sitting in seats next to me. They looked at me in shock, because they both had hats on. Then, in the next period, after that class, some of my African American women friends came complaining to me. They said, "Yeah, she told me to take my hat off, when almost everybody in the class had a hat on, and then, proceeded to send an e-mail out to everyone." Well, to which I feel as if she set that up, just so it doesn't seem like she was picking on us.

And then, for another teacher, they were talking about basketball, and he makes the comment, that said, "Oh, I don't watch basketball." I said, "Why?" He's like, "NBA's just nothing but a bunch of thugs, anyway."

Because of experiences like these, Luke felt that the academic year was dragging; he couldn't wait for it to be over. But Luke stays in contact with his support system to survive at Faith University, and he made it clear that he is in it for the long haul. Even though it is four years away, he wants to get his degree from Faith University.

### **Matthew (the Disciple, the Coming King)**

**Relationality reflection (lived self-other).** Matthew is a freshman in his second semester at Faith University. He is from the deep south. Although he has experienced some challenges in college, he had already witnessed racism and prejudice growing up in a southern state. Matthew grew up attending a predominantly Black church, and he reported that he attended service every Sunday. Matthew feels that his spirituality is slightly strong, that it is slightly important to attend religious services, and that it is slightly important to be connected to a religious community. When Matthew began to discuss his experiences, he started with how important his faith is while he is in college.

Matthew shared:

Faith is important. It's real important, I mean because you go through different trials while you're in college about grades and all that stuff so yeah, it's real important. Just praying and giving everything to God. Prayer. Yeah, and going to church. We did have Bible study but it, like, we'll have it and then slowly like, it stopped. Like, some reason like somebody get busy so it stopped so, I don't know. We'll probably start it back up sometime.

**Spatiality reflection (lived space).** Matthew met me in the student services office. He said that he does not hang out much in the student union unless other Black students are there, because the union usually is filled with white students. He shared his experiences in the classroom and explained how they have affected him.

Matthew shared:

Honestly, I feel like, I don't know, I be in class and I'll just be like, I'll just laugh while they speak and I'll keep to myself because I feel like if I say something it's probably gonna be like, you know, biased or they'd be like, "oh, he's saying that because he's Black" or something. You know?

Matthew then discussed his expectations for campus and his chapel experiences, and he mentioned that he lacks mentoring because few faculty members are Black. He expressed the idea that more could be done to support Black male students at Faith University.

Matthew shared:

A lot more could be done with chapel. I mean, we could have a gospel choir sing a little more, sometimes. I mean like, you like, meeting revival, something like that. You could have Black preachers, pastor, or something.

Because we really don't have that many like Black professors and stuff so like if you had more Black professors I mean there'd be like, students will like be more likely to enjoy class, you know, reach out to them more and have a person to go to with issues.

**Temporality (lived time).** Matthew was counting down the days until summer vacation. He was adamant about graduating, but he was very aware that

four years is a long way away. He also mentioned that chapel is early on Wednesdays, and he is not engaged because he is still trying to wake up. He thought that more people would be interested if chapel was offered at a different time.

**Thomas (the Disciple, Doubting Thomas)**

**Relationality reflection (lived self-other).** Thomas is a sophomore who grew up in a military family. Thomas reported that he was very involved in a predominantly Black church while he was growing up. Thomas feels that his spirituality is slightly strong, that it is very important to attend religious services, and that it is very important to be connected to a religious community. Thomas's parents were ministers, so he spent time at church in addition to the regular services. When Thomas began to talk about his experiences, he shared about the importance of his faith while in college.

Thomas shared:

I think it's very important with, you know, sometimes your grades might not be right where you want them to be, and having faith and believing in God, and knowing that everything's going to be okay is very important with your walk here.

**Spatiality reflection (lived space).** Thomas told me that he does not feel that he belongs in chapel; he attends only because it is a requirement. He also expressed the need for more Black faculty and staff on campus to provide support for Black students in the classroom, in chapel, and at the student union.

Thomas shared:

Whenever I first get there, they're nine times out of 10 going to play a song I don't know, and then I mean I try to connect with God, but it's like the words and what they're saying I'm not used to, and the lectures are really good, but it's just the beginning of it. The songs and stuff. I know recently we had a chapel where they played a song, then they would preach, then

we'd stand up and sing another song, like I just wasn't used to services being like that.

Thomas then mentioned a Black student services professional who formerly worked in the Student Affairs office.

I think bringing somebody back like [the former Black administrator] would..Like somebody who wouldn't just let Black people just feel like that, like he would bring us all together. I remember we used to do daily devotionals and stuff like that. He made it real comfortable for us. We could open up to him. We could talk to him and then nine times out of 10 he went through the same thing we did, and he always had an example, and a way so we can get through it.

### **David (the Young Shepard, the Psalmist)**

**Relationality reflection (lived self-other).** David is a senior who grew up very involved in the predominantly Black church that his grandparents had founded. David said he feels that his spirituality is not strong at all, that it is slightly important to attend religious services, and that it is not very important to be connected to a religious community. He was very interested in sharing his experiences for this study.

David is on the track team. He said that all he is interested in doing is running track and getting his degree.

David shared:

I'm not really here to make friends. I mean if I do make friends on the way that's good, but as far as me trying to get involved in stuff and grow spiritually, I don't. I mean I'm a part of the track team, but I'm here strictly for track and to get my degree.

**Spatiality reflection (lived space).** David met me in the student services office where I had been conducting interviews, and he asked if we could delay the interview so he could get something to eat. As he placed his order and waited, he



was stopped by numerous other students just to chat. I asked David about his popularity, and he said most people know him because of being on the track team or living in the Village, where most of the student athletes live. Because they live, eat, and attend many classes together, the athletes on campus have a relatively strong community.

When David talked about chapel, he expressed some strong feelings. David shared:

I go to chapel but for me, I walk into it with the mind, I'm here to get this credit, one less that I have to do, so when I go there, I'm not really focused on the message, honestly. I'm just there to get my credit and leave because it's hard to be attentive to something that you don't feel like you're a part of. Being at this school, I don't really feel like I'm welcome here, so when I go into these situations, I'm just here to do what I have to do, and I'm there because I have to be.

**Technology (lived cyborg relations).** David was recently in trouble for breaking a code of conduct rule for athletes regarding social media. David explained the situation and how it further added to his feeling that he is not supported at Faith University.

David shared:

I had a tough experience here because they are very judgmental. So there was a time last year where I had a post on Facebook with my life, it's my business, and I guess at the time I was athlete of the week, so it prompted someone to go to my Facebook page and they saw something they didn't like, so they took disciplinary action, which is stupid to me because, like...other white athletes break the rules all the time and they never get punished.

**Moses (the Deliverer of His People)**

**Relationality reflection (lived self-other).** Moses is a sophomore football player who was a member of the Black Student Association before the university

disbanded it. (The disbanding of the Black Student Association is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.) Moses did not grow up attending a predominantly Black church; he reported not being involved with the Black church until his high school years. Moses feels that his spirituality is very strong, that it is very important to attend religious services, and that it is very important to be connected to a religious community. He added that he relies on his faith to be close to God. Moses also shared he sometimes feels awkward on campus as a Black male, because there are so few Black students.

**Corporeality reflection (lived body).** He was wearing Faith University athletic gear when we met. He seemed somewhat uneasy during our discussion, saying that he was nervous that a coach or administrator might hear the things he said. I assured him that all responses were confidential and that his participation was completely voluntary. After that, Moses was very forthcoming about his experiences. Moses did take time to think through his answers and he was very strategic in his answers. At times, it felt like Moses did not know if I was going to report his experiences to someone in power at the institution and he would be in some trouble.

#### **Paul (the Apostle, the Church Planter)**

**Relationality reflection (lived self-other).** Paul is a senior. He was very involved in a predominantly Black church while he was growing up. He is very popular and has been involved with the Student Government Association, the Black Student Association, and other student groups. He has also served as a Resident Advisor in the men's residence halls. Paul said he feels that his spirituality is very

strong, that it is very important to attend religious services, and that it is very important to be connected to a religious community. As a child, Paul participated in church activities such as bible school, summer camps, and other events. He shared his experience as a Black male on campus candidly and openly.

Paul shared:

For me, especially when I first got here, I kinda wanted to make a statement to where it's just not all bad people, or the people you think of when you see on TV that had this certain stereotype and things like that. I want to give them a more different view on what it was like to be a Black man and be educated at the same time. It's kinda awkward sometimes. You're sitting in class and you're the only Black person in class. You may be really the only Black person they really see and have contact with.

**Spatiality reflection (lived space).** When I met Paul, he was sitting in the student union at a meeting of one of the student organizations for which he serves as a leader. He made an appointment to do the interview with me at a later time. Paul was very excited and upbeat about his senior year and was looking forward to graduation. Although he is a well-known and respected leader on campus, he has also experienced some challenges regarding campus life and the chapel experience.

Paul shared:

For me, it's kinda crazy cause I don't care who brings the Words as long as they're bringing the Word and they're solid in their faith, but there are many times I kinda wish I did see more brothers up there preaching the Word cause I would be able to relate to them in a different way that I'm not able to relate to my brothers that are more represented. See what I'm saying? Yeah, I just wish that we were better represented. I wish that we had a little bit more Black speakers that would come and kinda bring the Word.

**Technology (lived cyborg relations).** Paul gave me his cell phone number, saying he was eager to know when the study was completed so that he could read it. He told me that he, too, was going to provide the administration with some policy

suggestions to enhance the experiences of minority students. Because he had a working relationship with the administration, Paul felt he had a duty to be a voice for other minorities.

### **Barnabas (the Son of Encouragement)**

**Relationality reflection (lived self-other).** Barnabas is a freshman with an outgoing personality who was excited to meet me and share his experiences as part of the study. Barnabas said he feels that his spirituality is not very strong, that it is slightly important to attend religious services, and that it is slightly important to be connected to a religious community. He enjoys a strong mentoring relationship with a business faculty member. He shared his experience as a Black male on campus.

Barnabas shared:

For me, I came from, basically and I see Black people all the time coming here, it's kinda like you get looked at differently. You get treated a certain way, it's just a different experience, something I'm not really comfortable with or used to.

**Spatiality reflection (lived space).** Barnabas was involved in the Black Student Association until it was disbanded. He was very explicit about his experience in chapel and in the classroom.

Barnabas shared:

Going to chapel, it's a waste of my time. I haven't gone since the first three weeks cause I don't plan on graduating from here. In the classroom, I haven't learned anything. And then they don't really teach, it's just they put it on the board and go about their day. I just feel like I've wasted my time.

**Corporeality reflection (lived body).** Barnabas is well dressed and wearing a cross around his neck. He is concerned about the amount of time needed for the interview because he is trying his best to earn good grades, even though he does not

feel that he belongs at Faith University. Barnabas is also focused on becoming a better Christian.

Barnabas shared:

I'm really just trying to grow in my faith and learn more and establish myself with God.

### **Jonah (the Fisherman)**

**Relationality reflection (lived self-other).** Jonah is a junior who did not become seriously engaged in church until his later teenage years. He said he feels that his spirituality is slightly strong, that it is very important to attend religious services, and that it is very important to be connected to a religious community. He talked about the importance of faith while in college.

Jonah shared:

Faith is extremely important, I think faith, along with effort is a reason why I can take these steps as a college student and that goes with the classroom, that goes with my brothers and sisters here, the community, the churches; faith is really important, yeah.

**Spatiality reflection (lived space).** Jonah shared openly about his chapel and classroom experiences.

Jonah shared:

In Chapel, in classrooms, around campus, I think they can do a better job of allowing everybody to feel like we're cared about. I'm not saying they push us to the side or anything but there's a lot of things they come with or approach us with or come up with and there's just no understanding, there's no connection with that. I think the connection relationship is extremely important, just like faith, ya know.

**Corporeality reflection (lived body).** Jonah is growing his hair out and has a well-rounded afro. Community is important to Jonah; he likes to make sure people

are included. He has a compassionate persona, and it is obvious that he is invested in inclusion across identities.

### **Titus (the Pastor)**

**Relationality reflection (lived self-other).** Titus is a freshman who is very open and forthcoming about his experiences. He said he feels that his spirituality is very strong, that it is very important to attend religious services, and that it is very important to be connected to a religious community. During our discussion, Titus told me that he was going to leave Faith University.

Titus shared:

I'm actually leaving after this semester. I definitely don't feel like, it's not that I feel oppressed or anything, for a lack of a better word, because of my race, I just also feel like they don't really try to think of how they could relate to ... I think they're trying to figure out how they're going to relate to the body as a whole, and not us a people.

Titus also discussed the influence of his childhood pastor, a person he could trust and look to guidance for throughout his life.

Titus shared:

Yeah, my pastor was pretty important because he was also my coach too so he kinda was the father figure I had, taught me how to be a man, got me closer with God. That kind of thing.

**Spatiality reflection (lived space).** Titus reflected on his experiences in the classroom and in chapel.

Titus shared:

It's pretty important to me to belong, I know it's my faith and strong faith, it's the only reason I'm still here, to be able to have that faith in Christ and knowing that his plan for me is what I need to do and sustain through the uncomfortable places like chapel.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter presented the data from the interview questions posed in chapter three. The next chapter will discuss themes that emerged. The participants in the study shared their experiences and their voice was allowed to be heard through those experiences. The vignettes were used in order to give a holistic view of the participant and the various identities they hold as a student at Faith University. While not all of the life existential guides were used for every participant, I used the data to give voice to all the experiences of the participants.

## **Chapter Five: Themes**

Chapter five presents the themes that emerged from the data. The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore how Black males experience the college environment at predominantly white Christian institutions (PWCIs). A phenomenological design was used to describe and shed light on the experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of Black male college students (van Manen, 1997). I have determined how the twelve Black males who participated in the study experience PWCIs, how their experiences affect their spiritual identity, and how their race and gender identities intersect with campus religious practices. The lived experiences of the Black male participants add a strong and compelling voice to the conversation about how Black males who identify as Christian experience PWCIs.

### **Themes**

This section of the chapter will focus on the themes, which provide the requisite details and insight to answer the research questions. The research questions for the study were: How do Black Christian males experience PWCIs? The subquestions are: How, and in what ways, do Black males' experiences at PWCIs affect their spiritual identity? And what messages about race and gender do they receive from campus religious practices? Through interviews about lived experiences, these questions have been answered, and the themes offer strong insight into Black Christian male student experiences. These themes that emerged are discussed below.



## **Chapel**

The chapel experience emerged as a strong theme, with participants reporting that they find it difficult to connect with God in the campus chapel services. Students at Faith University are required to attend chapel 96 times during their four years to satisfy the requirements of their degree. During chapel, a speaker preaches a sermon after two praise/worship songs are performed by music majors or the campus choir (usually the predominantly white choir, not the predominantly Black gospel choir). Chapel takes place every Wednesday morning at 10:00, and other chapel opportunities sometimes occur on other days of the week. This practice helps strengthen the integration of faith and learning: students must commit not only to learning, by attending classes, but also to spiritual development, by attending chapel (Dockery, 2000). However, participants felt that chapel usually is focused on the spiritual development of white students, because the service caters to white religious norms.

Ten participants found chapel challenging partly because the chapel speaker usually was not the kind of speaker to which they were accustomed. The chapel speaker most often is a white male whose speaking style resembles that of a lecture rather than a sermon. This was challenging for participants because they felt that this style lacks the emotion, passion, and conviction of the preaching they were exposed to in the Black church.

Matthew shared:

They don't even like get with expression. They just talk and it's more of like, a lecture, you know? You're in class. You're in a lecture and you kinda like get bored sometimes, like it's just like monotone and just keep time. But if they were like, you know, at a certain point get loud and actually try to

like mean it. Like you mean something and try to like express it to us then probably would like actually be like engaged into it and try to like, “oh, what he’s saying” and try to listen to what they talking about.

Paul shared:

For me, it's kinda crazy cause I don't care who brings the Words as long as they're bringing the Word and they're solid in their faith but there are many times I kinda wish I did see more brothers up there preaching the Word cause I would be able to relate to them in a different way than I'm not able to relate to my brothers that are more represented. See what I'm saying? Yeah, I just wish that we were more better represented. I wish that we had a little bit more black speakers that would come and kinda bring the word.

In detailed conversation about chapel speakers, many of the participants shared that becoming comfortable with a different style is challenging, but not the only problem. The predominance of white male preachers as chapel speakers and the rare experience of having a Black chapel speaker or any other minority adds to the challenge. This challenge causes alienation for Black male students because white norms dominate (Claerbaut, 1976). Unfortunately, Black preachers usually do not speak in chapel except during Black history month or when the gospel choir, composed mainly of Black students, sings at the service. But the gospel choir is rarely invited to sing in chapel; it is more of a novelty than a norm. However, predominantly white music groups perform often and are encouraged to be a part of the chapel experience.

Luke shared:

Personally, I don't like the fact that the only time we can get an African American pastor here is when the gospel choir sings, and the gospel choir doesn't sing that often. I feel like, most students here experience a culture shock every time an African American pastor comes in, because they're not here that often, for one, and for two, it's not fair, in my opinion, that we don't get to experience that more often, what we're used to, because they want to keep it in a safe bubble.

Jonah shared:

In Chapel, in classrooms, around campus I think they can do a better job of allowing everybody to feel like we're cared about. I'm not saying they push us to the side or anything but there's a lot of things they come with or approach us with or come up with and there's just no understanding, there's no connection with that. I think the connection relationship is extremely important, just like faith, ya know.

Participants mentioned that they attend chapel only because it is required.

They see it as a burden rather than an opportunity to develop spiritually. At colleges and universities of all kinds, many students learn to welcome diversity and to appreciate different perspectives. PWCI's should incorporate this lesson into their chapel services by encouraging diverse worship styles, because perpetuating almost exclusively white worship norms alienates students from other religious traditions and hinders their spiritual growth (Paredes-Collins, 2013).

David shared:

For me, I walk into it with the mind, I'm here to get this credit, one less that I have to do, so when I go there, I'm not really focused on the message, honestly. I'm just there to get my credit and leave because it's hard to be attentive to something that you don't feel like you're a part of. Being at this school, I don't really feel like I'm welcome here, so when I go into these situations, I'm just here to do what I have to do, and I'm there because I have to be.

### **Individual Spiritual Development**

Individual spiritual development was another theme that emerged from the participant interviews. Ten participants reported that any spiritual growth they experience comes from individual time spent working on their own faith development, not from chapel services or other campus spiritual activities.

Participants reported that they study the bible, pray, and go to a local Black church on their own. It is important to note that the participants in this study are not necessarily lacking in spiritual development, but that their college, which explicitly

purports to foster students' spiritual growth, is failing almost completely to support their spiritual development.

Luke shared:

I read my Bible regularly, or at least try to, when I have the time, because I do get busy. Prayer's a big aspect of my life, and just, being able to sing praises to Christ, that gets me through it, as well.

John shared:

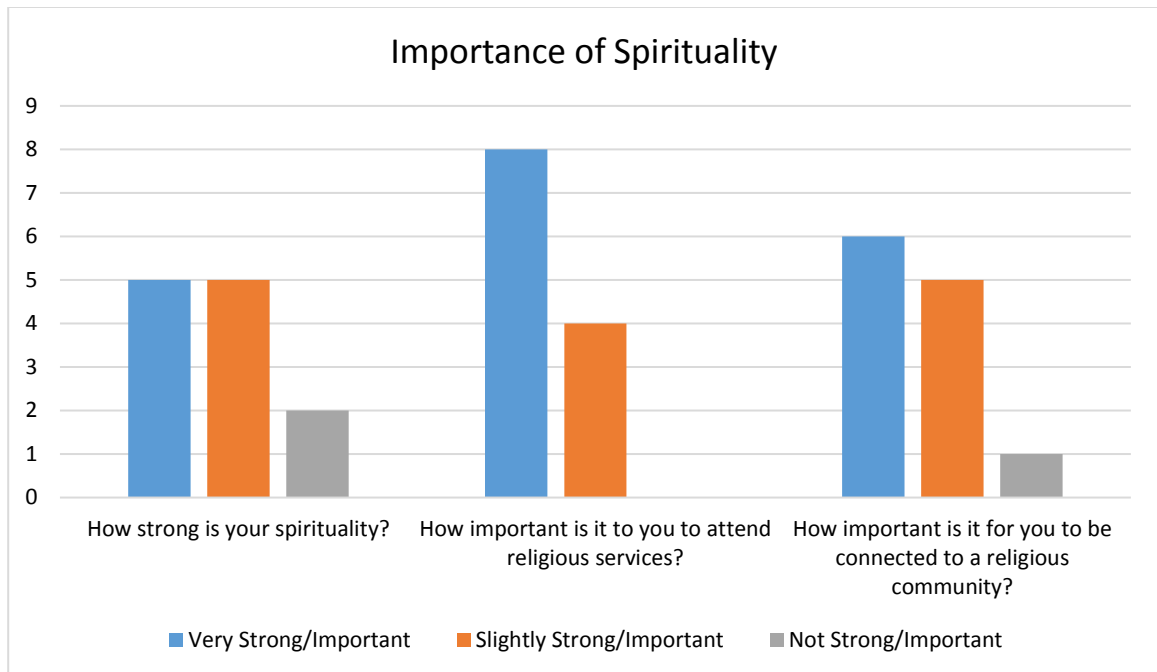
I read my bible, and I go to church, I try to do as much as I can on my own.

Titus shared:

Well, I try to do devotions every day. Every Sunday I try to go to church.

### **Importance of Spirituality**

The importance of spirituality emerged as a theme, and most participants shared that faith while in college is important. The demographic sheet issued prior to the interviews revealed participants' beliefs about the importance of spirituality, attendance at religious services, and connection to a religious community. The Figure 1, below, shows the participants' responses.



**Figure 1. Summary of participants' responses to questions about spirituality.**

Participants shared that faith plays a major role in their lives and that it has served them in many different ways.

### **Spirituality serves as a tool to help Black males students persevere**

Black males encounter many challenges in higher education, including financial, emotional, academic, and spiritual. However, participants shared that having faith while in college is important and that spirituality has helped them get through the challenges they encounter.

Luke shared:

The way I see it is, Christ was persecuted, and he was long-suffering, and being an African American male, that just comes with the territory. That's something you just have to get used to, and get accustomed to, because it happens, as soon as school starts, really, from K-12, and so forth. So I feel like, being long-suffering in those aspects, is necessary, and that comes along with faith, because without faith in Christ, you cannot be.

John shared:

Everything happens for a reason, and I put my faith high with God. So, as long as my faith is high, and strong, I'll get through it.

Mark shared:

It plays a big role, but I'm not going to pretend like I have the best relationship with the Lord right now. But, I believe that the Lord sets you up for opportunities and even though you can't see him, even though you can't see his works, they do happen. I believe faith is a big part 'cause he's helped me out a lot

### **Spirituality serves as a guide for life issues**

Participants shared encounters they have had on campus and other life issues that have arisen with friends and family. Many of the participants shared that their faith and spirituality guided them through those issues and that prayer helps them make important decisions.

Moses shared:

For me, it's the biggest role of my life. I'm just getting closer to God each and every day, allow him to direct my path in life. So it just plays a big role for me.

Barnabas shared:

I read Jesus calling the book, and that helps me and it gives me scriptures, and I try to relate that to my life

Matthew shared:

Faith is important. It's real important, I mean because you go through different trials while you're in college about grades and all that stuff so yeah, it's real important. Just praying and giving everything to God.

### **Spirituality is strengthened by family**

Participants expressed the importance of sharing spiritual practices with family. Several participants call home often to speak with family members about issues or challenges, and they also pray with family members.

Mark shared:

My father grew up in the same, in the more predominately white side of town, so he dealt with a lot of stuff back in the day, so I just always ask him if I had any issues or had any struggles, “How did you go through it? What did you do?” So he always told me, “Just pray to the Lord.” And then how he also personally dealt with it. That’s how I got through a lot of my problems, or still am.

Luke shared:

My parents being a phone call away. That’s what really helps me make it through and stay strong.

### **Lack of Support**

Black college students need unwavering support to progress towards graduation, most commonly academic, social, emotional, and financial support (Herndon & Hirt, 2004). Yet many participants shared that they feel a lack of spiritual, academic, and social support at Faith University due to their Black and male identities. For instance, Paul is involved in various campus activities and student organizations, but he said he feels hindered from being who he really is because of his Black male identity.

Paul shared:

I just feel like you can’t really be yourself around campus. I can’t go and do things I would normally do. Just be myself. I can’t talk the way I want to talk; use the same slang words I’ll use if I was around all Black people. There’s a certain way I can talk, there’s a certain way I can assert my words and people be able to understand what I’m talking about and where I’m coming from.

Likewise, Luke said that he gets most of his support from his family and the Black church, not from Faith University. Luke has encountered trying times at Faith University, including many instances of racism and bigotry. He indicated that he

relied on his intellect and his faith in God to get him through the challenges of his college experiences.

Luke shared:

It was mainly the Black church where I got that resolve, and support, because they knew that I was coming here. It was mostly coming from my father. He was telling me that this is a different church, this is a Christian college, but that doesn't mean that you'll still not encounter some struggles. So, due to my father and mother jointly helping me with that, and my grandparents, as well, and just the whole African American church community praying for me, and encouraging me, I've been able to get along.

Supporting identity development is critical to the success of Black male students. If the institution does not support students while they go through identity development, it has missed an opportunity enhance students' college experience and contribute to their success. But if spiritual support is strong, Black males can rely on spirituality as a lens that helps them navigate their other identities while in college (McGuire, Cisneros, & McGuire, 2017).

### **Unwelcoming Campus Environment**

Feeling welcome and feeling a sense of belonging are important environmental factors that affect Black male students' transition to college (Chavous, 2000). If the campus environment does not create the space needed for Black males to grow and thrive, these students will confront feelings of loneliness, alienation, and impostor syndrome (Allen, 1992; Clance & Imes, 1978). Dancy & Jean-Marie (2014) have noted that certain university processes perpetuate impostor syndrome. For example, sorority and fraternity recruitment processes often assume that students have the financial means to purchase a large new wardrobe for Greek life events. Students without such financial means are left thinking, "everyone here



is wealthy except me. I don't belong." Likewise, Dancy and Jean-Marie point out that impostorship can be reproduced in the interactions between faculty and students. For instance, professors may make the assumption that every student is familiar with a core body of knowledge, saying things like "As we all know from reading Hamlet, it can be difficult to get along with one's stepfather." The students who have read Hamlet may laugh, but those whose high school courses didn't cover Shakespeare are left feeling that they just don't get the joke – and that they don't belong. Campus characteristics and campus climate are directly connected to Black college students' overall success (Allen, 1992).

Participants shared various instances of blatant racism and bigotry. Ten of the participants recounted a specific experience, including when and where it occurred and who was involved. Some of these interactions involved faculty in the classroom, some occurred in the athletic facilities, and some happened in common areas such as the student union and the cafeteria.

Luke shared:

And then, for another teacher, they were talking about basketball, and he makes the comment, that said, "Oh, I don't watch basketball." I said, "Why?" He's like, "NBA's just nothing but a bunch of thugs, anyway."

Mark shared:

"I'd probably say just it's not, it's a lack of respect, but it's more behind your back. It's not flat out in your face. A lot of times they'll say, they wouldn't say the N word with the hard R, but like with an A, and then they will ask "How come you all can say it but we can't say it?" So they'll say it, then try to argue like, "It's fine." I also don't think as Black people it's fine, but I think out here it's the difference with the lack of respect. They just don't understand our culture and where we've come from and so they just think a lot of things are just in the past, where it's really not.

David shared:

I wouldn't be here if I didn't have a black faculty member help me out. I would have been kicked out. That's what they were trying to do. Around the same time there were students who, they started this little, small fraternity, or whatever, and they said something racial, and they were just going to get a slap on the wrist, but I had to fight for them to get punishment because when I was in the office, I got punishment for what I did.

Several participants mentioned that the Black Student Association at Faith University had been dismantled. Upperclassmen had started the organization as an effort to help new Black students feel welcomed. In addition to creating a network and a support system for Black students at Faith University, the organization shared useful information about local Black barbershops and salons, local Black churches, and so forth. The students used the GroupMe app on their cell phones and added new members during Welcome Week to stay connected throughout the school year and even during holidays. One participant told me that whenever a Black student was rumored to be leaving the university, other students would use GroupMe to rally support and find out what problems the student was experiencing. According to participants, Faith University disbanded the Black Student Association because its charter had not been signed by a university vice-president and its “reason for existence” did not support the university’s mission. However, the group’s leadership disagrees with the university’s reasons for dismantling the organization; they say that they followed all of the rules for student organizations. Many of this study’s participants stated that the Black Student Association was the only campus group they belonged to; it gave them the support that no other university organization provided, so its dismantling was a particularly difficult blow.

Matthew shared:

I participated in Black Student Association, until it was disbanded, and I am not involved in anything else on campus.

Luke shared:

I was going to the BSA meetings until it was shut down, I heard from chatting around the community, that they wanted somebody else to lead who was stronger in their faith, and actually organized.

Another challenge for participants around theme of campus environment was the sense that many faculty, staff, and students use Christianity as a veil to cover up their underlying racism. Several participants indicated that they felt prepared to endure challenges at college not only because of their family support and faith in God, but also due to previous encounters with racist bigotry. I found it shocking that many participants were unsurprised when professed Christians engaged in hateful and disrespectful behavior. Luke shared very candidly:

Like, how can you proclaim Christianity and love and faith when you're walking around talking about "oh, the South shall rise again. Confederacy." People got Confederate flags as their license plates, stuff like that here. When you have to deal with stuff like that, people like that, kinda gets hard to get along.

Many of the participants shared challenges they had in-class ranging from racist faculty to assumptions being made about their academic ability because they were black males. The racist and prejudice culture not only stains the campus activities, but it also stains the classroom and affects the Black male students in-class experiences.

Luke shared:

I was talking to one of my friends, my good friend Mikayla Jessup about this issue yesterday. I was just really not feeling this experience at all. I have an exam coming up today, which was actually not too bad. I have annotated bibliography due also and I just not feeling this at all and she asked me, "Do you think you'll be different if we went to HBCU?" I was like, "most

definitely," because I feel like there teachers would be more involved. Teachers would actually care more about our learning experience because they're in the high position, they've had to go through all the struggles of having to get doctorates and becoming who they are as academic leaders throughout this society and I think, in that aspect, they would care more because they know the struggle that all of us have to deal with being African-Americans. And, recently this was talked about in class, African-American get the same degree, can get the same masters as someone Caucasian but if you're going after the same job, they'll probably get it because ... It's just a stigma in society and I feel like that's how it is here.

### **Lack of Mentors**

Participants noted that they found few mentors or advocates on campus in whom they could confide. Several participants named a few faculty members as mentors, but not one participant named any staff members. Until recently, one administrator at Faith University was a Black man holding a position as a student services professional. Participants named him as a source of support and commitment to their success. However, upon his departure, Faith University has been left without a single Black administrator, and participants report that they have not found a similar connection with any other staff or administrators. Although participants interact with some of the white administrators, they have not sought out mentorship from them.

Jonah shared:

For me, I really wish we had more ... someone that could can like really teach us how to be a Black man and how to succeed as a Black man on campus. Not just on campus, but life in general. All I've ever had anybody take me up under their wing and show me, "Hey, you gonna be pushed by the police this way or you're just going to be looked at this way and this is how you should handle that. This is how you should speak; this is how you should actually do life in that way."

Paul shared:

More mentors that understand and not with just questions or words, definitely with action.

Thomas shared:

I think bringing somebody back like [the former Black administrator] would...Like somebody who wouldn't just let Black people just feel like that, like he would bring us all together. I remember we used to do daily devotionals and stuff like that. He made it real comfortable for us. We could open up to him. We could talk to him and then nine times out of 10 he went through the same thing we did, and he always had an example, and a way so we can get through it.

David shared:

I was actually going to devotions when [the former Black Administrator] was holding them. Like now there are some that may go on, I wouldn't know about because I'm not involved in it, I felt really comfortable with him. I could talk to him like I talk to my friends and I didn't feel as if I was being judged.

Participants also mentioned that having a mentor would help in areas other than spirituality, such as academics, discipline (if disciplinary issues arose), and overall survival at Faith University.

## **Honor**

Several participants expressed that they felt “special” as a Black male at Faith University because of the school’s prestige and academic rigor. But being the “exception” also made them feel that they had to represent all Black males to the campus’s white students, faculty, and staff. I found this theme particularly interesting because Black males so often are characterized as aggressors and blamed for many of society’s ills. However, the Black males participating in this study view themselves as the “special” ones who must prove that Black Christian males can succeed at PWCIs.

When asked “What does it mean to be a Black man at Faith University?” participants repeatedly shared themes touching on honor, privilege, and willingness to endure in order to make the most of their opportunity to earn a degree at this respected university.

Thomas shared:

There’s not many of us here, so I feel like we really stand out, and we’re really special.

John shared:

It means that’s...That’s tough. That’s a little tough one. I’ll say it’s more showing what Black people are made and showing that we’re not just regular Black students, we came here to get our education and prove we are educated Black people.

Mark shared:

What it means to be Black here is special. I like, I try to look at it as a positive way, at the same time. It has some negative ways, but there’s not too many Black people here and plus this is a very prestigious school and so I feel honored to be here and I feel honored to be in the business programs here because, for one, I’m also a Black athlete. People just expect me to be in some easy major where I just, I can roll through four years. Where I’m actually trying to learn, so I really think it’s special being Black here. As a Black male, it’s also, it’s just a special opportunity.

### **Being Black at Faith University**

The experiences that participants shared regarding their Black identity at Faith University showed that being a Christian does not exempt a person from being Black. Likewise, being educated, articulate, and well-dressed does not allow a person an escape from being Black. Participants shared the following stories when asked, “As a Black student here at Faith University, have you faced any issues such as discrimination; feeling unwelcome at activities or events; or lack of support for your spiritual, social, or academic development?”

Luke shared:

I participated in SGA [Student Government Association], but I didn't really want to be in that, because, being African American, I didn't feel like my voice was heard. Because every time I mentioned something, they would either just look at me, or not acknowledge me saying anything, or they would just shoot it down, continue on with what they felt like was correct. Only two other African Americans are in SGA, and one of them's mixed, so she has more of a say, because, for whatever reason, she personally identifies as white, because she's so...

Paul shared:

For me, especially when I first got here, I kinda wanted to make a statement to where it's just not all bad people, or the people you think of when you see on TV that had this certain stereotype and things like that. I want to give them a more different view on what it was like to be a Black man and be educated at the same time. It's kinda awkward sometimes. You're sitting in class and you're the only Black person in class. You may be really the only Black person they really see and have contact with. Yeah.

Mark shared:

I feel like I do, but at the same time it's tough because I realize this semester, I tell my friends all the time, I feel like the people here on campus are afraid of African American males. I've experienced like just walking around and getting weird looks, or I saw a lady one time, I was walking around the same sidewalk, and she decided to go on the other side 'cause she saw me coming. And, for me, that will frustrate me and I wouldn't grow, I wouldn't understand, I would be angry and ask God, "I don't understand why, what makes us so intimidating?"

Titus shared:

Like, everybody on campus, they ask me "oh are you here for football or are you here for some sport?" I'm like "why I gotta be here for football?" "Yeah, you know I'm just here to learn." They act like they're surprised that you're doing what you're doing with the major and they're surprised.

Barnabas shared:

A lot of African Americans that are really smart, are leaving. I know one biochemistry major and nobody ever suspects him to be that. He's leaving because he said he just can't deal with this mess here.

## **Athletics and Spirituality**

Six of the participants were involved in athletics, including five on the football team and one on the track team. Recently, Faith University switched from the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics to the National Collegiate Athletic Association Division II, a move that will allow the university to compete on a higher level and will offer more exposure for both the institutions and its student athletes. The athletes who participated in this study said that they try to be involved in non-athletic activities on campus despite their tight schedules. They also indicated that they were drawn to Faith University either by an athletic scholarship or by the opportunity to play their sport. Although they reported having a spiritual self even before college, they reported that their spirituality became stronger after arriving on campus. Some of them told me that their sport was the only thing keeping them at Faith University; the negative aspects of the campus environment would have made them leave, if they had not had a love for their sport and a commitment to their teammates.

Barnabas shared:

I'm not gonna lie, because of the way things are, I feel like I've wasted my time being here and if it wasn't for football I wouldn't be here.

Mark shared:

I'd probably say my faith. I'm not going to lie, I really just, really came here for football. I didn't know we were going to still have chapel. I thought it'd be more like TCU, it was still just the name of the college, but I didn't know they still had chapel and whatnot. The only visit I ever came on was just a football visit. They never really toured me around campus. They showed me the dorms, the football field, the weight room, and I was like, "I'll come play here." My mom was like, this is the place for me to go. But, yeah, so I didn't know it was actually, we still had chapel, we still had lot of communities with bible study and everything. I probably say really now; it is my faith



first. Then it's football and then academics. I mean, just because football above academics, doesn't mean I slack in the classroom, but I really came here for football. But you know, academics is the way I'm going to succeed.

### **Conclusion**

Chapter five provided the themes that emerged from the data analysis. I conducted the data analysis using hermeneutic phenomenological guides within the framework of intersectionality, which helped me discover the emergent themes. The themes that emerged allowed for the lived experiences of the participants to be understood in a myriad of ways. Not all participants had the same experience but they had the same common elements that show up as a theme in the data. The next chapter provides a discussion of the findings, implications, conclusions, and recommendations.

## **Chapter Six: Discussion of Findings, Implications, Recommendations, and Conclusions**

This chapter will discuss the findings in detail, provide implications for future research and practice, and make recommendations for institutions of higher education. The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to examine how the predominantly white Christian institution (PWCI) environment affects Black males' college experiences. The findings contribute to the scant literature on Black male collegians at PWCIs. Therefore, the findings may help Christian institutions (a) develop intentional student-focused spiritual programs, (b) develop policies and practices that are more inclusive and promote supportive identity development, (c) recruit and retain Black faculty and staff who can serve and support Black male students, and (d) focus more intently on the development of Black male athletes. Although Black women students were not addressed in this study, it is important for researchers to continue to address the needs of both male and women Black students at PWCIs.

### **Theoretical Analysis: Intersectionality**

A demographic sheet was used to collect information from the participants prior to the interviews and to shed light on their individual characteristics. All twelve participants identified racially as Black or African American, and two listed a second racial identity as well (one listed Hispanic or Latino, and the other listed American Indian or Alaska Native). In addition, all twelve identified as male and Christian.

This study used intersectionality theory as a framework for exploring how racial, gender, and Christian identities interact with each other to affect the success of Black male college students. Specifically, this study explored the experiences of Black Christian males who attend PWCIIs by analyzing these institutions' embedded intersectional racist and sexist oppressions. Intersectionality theory is a critical exploration that examines existing systems of power and complicates how identities intersect with each other (Crenshaw, 1991).

During the interviews, participants spoke about the importance of women church leaders in their lives, including women who held roles as pastors and elders. For instance, David mentioned his grandmother, who had founded the church he attended and built it from the ground up. Stories such as David's challenge the patriarchy of the Black church, where women historically were limited to lesser roles and subjected to male dominance. Witnessing this kind of challenge to male dominance will inform how David, as a Black Christian male, views the power conferred on him by his male and Christian identities. However, being that spiritual leadership is often reserved for males, it is likely that David's grandmother while she is the founder of the church, will never get the respect as the spiritual leader of the church because of system of power that breeds male dominance.

The participants also spoke about their racial identity, and their responses make it clear that they are seen as "Black" before "male" by both themselves and others. Dancy (2012) noted that Black males do not dwell on their maleness or how it affects their lives, being more reflective on their racial experiences and not their gendered ones. But the power and privilege they have as males, if unchecked and

unchallenged, will continue to fuel patriarchy. Additionally, since they do not see their male privilege, when they desire diversity in the chapel experience, the participants almost exclusively shared they wanted a Black pastor, which is often a Black male. This oppressive mindset is created from viewing oppression and seeing it as a norm. Furthermore, not recognizing that even as an oppressed person, themselves as Black males are still privileged and see their “blackness” before their “maleness”. Black women students, on the other hand, are constantly reminded about their gender identity as they engage in the institutional environment from the classroom to the student union.

Participants who were athletes discussed their tight schedules and their worry about their coaches’ reactions if they missed chapel. These participants noted that others assumed they were athletes simply because they were Black males, partly due to their physical stature and partly because of the prevalent societal belief that Black males in college must be athletes. However, the same assumption is not made about Black women on campus. Also, the attention and treatment that is given to Black males because of the assumption that they are athletes is likely not the same attention and treatment that Black women on campus receive due to the patriarchal environment. The athletes in this study wore nice athletic gear and spoke about scholarships that they received as student athletes. A future study should be conducted to find out whether the same level of funding and support is given to women athletes.

Faith University has an environment that supports and encourages patriarchy and male privilege, which leads to the risk that Black male students may learn that

they must employ this type of oppression in order to be successful. Most social environments support male dominance, and it should be noted that males of all races are privileged through their male identity. This study's participants, although living in a racially oppressive environment at Faith University, simultaneously experience a challenge to that oppression: the Black church. Edwards (2013) posits that the Black church is a form of anti-colonial resistance that allows members to find liberation in the same God and Savior that their oppressors use to afflict them. In other words, the Black church turns an institution of their oppression, Christianity, into a means of liberation.

Participants' experiences showed the conflict inherent in being Black and Christian at a PWCI. They also showed resistance as they encountered racist experiences, and they maintained a strong sense of their spiritual self because they saw their faith in God as a way to endure. It is important to note that Christian privilege and male privilege both promote "blackness", so a Black Christian male will see challenges around race before Christianity or manhood. Intersectional support programs, such as Black male initiatives, Black male discipleship programs, and intentional Black male spiritual development opportunities, are needed to ensure that Black male students' identities are supported while they are in college (Mitchell, Simmons, & Greyerbiehl, 2014).

### **Discussion of Findings**

Black male students are underrepresented in U.S. higher education. It is common to find that Black males are not enrolling in higher education institutions, and among those who do enroll, many do not persist to graduation. However, for

many Black male students, Christianity is a source of strength that boosts their persistence and perseverance. For this reason, it is worth examining the role of Christianity in Black male students' lives (Strayhorn, Terrell, & Watson, 2010). Black males' experiences at non-Christian institutions have been studied extensively, but little is known about the experiences of Christian Black males attending Christian higher education institutions. Knowing more about the role that Christianity plays will guide us in developing effective programs to support Black males' academic success.

My study focused specifically on the Christian identity of Black males, with the understanding that there may be some intersectionality between race, gender, and spirituality. Furthermore, intersections of race and spiritual identity can have an effect on student success. It is therefore imperative that institutions create an environment within which Black male students can succeed. Black males can be successful with the appropriate support and proper environment (Herndon & Hirt, 2004). The research question for this study was: How do Black Christian males experience predominantly white Christian colleges and universities? The sub-questions were: How, and in what ways, do Black males' experiences at these institutions affect their spiritual identity? And what messages about race and gender do they receive from campus religious practices? This study focused on the lived experiences of Black male students at predominantly white Christian institutions. The themes and findings that emerged from my study and that answer the research questions are discussed below.

The participants shared about many of their experiences on campus. The findings that emerged are in line with the findings of other studies that suggest the importance of understanding how Black males experience PWCI. The three findings that emerged are (1) Black male students' spiritual needs are not being met, (2) Black male students feel that they do not belong, and (3) Black male students feel that they are carrying the torch. All three findings contribute to a better understanding of how Black Christian males experience PWCI.

The finding *Black male students' spiritual needs are not being met* speaks to the fact that Black male students experience white Christian institutions differently than other students. Students arrive at college not only with the ambition to pursue education, but also with a desire to make meaning of their life through a spiritual journey or religious convictions (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011). The study shows that spirituality is a quality that Black male students bring with them to college; it sustains them through tough times, it guides them through challenging situations, and it helps them remain steadfast. Dancy (2010) noted that spirituality was used as a powerful coping mechanism for both on- and off-campus experiences. Through everything that Black male students must endure on campus, spirituality for many is the constant element that provides resolve. This theme aligned with the results of other studies showing that spirituality is a contributing factor to student success. One theme found by Wood & Hilton (2012) was that spirituality provided the ability to overcome battles. Many participants in this study shared that prayer, bible study, and family members' prayers gave them the strength to endure their campus experience. The challenge is that their college does not support their spiritual

development because of the exclusive white religious norms that permeate spiritual development activities. Most notable is the theme *chapel*, which contributes to how Black males experienced the institution. It was challenging for participants to find spiritual development in chapel because of the exclusive white experience.

Religiosity is the over commitment to religious practices for the sake of being religious, this has an effect on spirituality because it can cause people to miss the true quest of faith. At PWCIIs, if they continue to just do things to be considered religious but in the process exclude a whole population seeking to be spiritual then they are failing in spiritual development. Furthermore, a subtheme that emerged was *individual spiritual development*; many participants shared that they attended a local Black church, read the bible, or prayed on their own and did not rely on campus spiritual life activities to grow spiritually.

The finding *Black male students feel that they do not belong* confirms that the campus environment is challenging for Black males and has created some difficult experiences. Claerbaut (1976) provided a historical perspective on the campus climate for Black students during the 1960s, a time of turbulent race relations. Claerbaut notes that the catalyst for change at Christian institutions was the civil rights era, which pushed private PWCIIs—known as elitist, racist, and all-white—to admit Black Christian students, form Black student groups, and hire Black Christian staff (Claerbaut, 1976). It is unfortunate, but not surprising, that campus life for Black students has changed so little at PWCIIs in the intervening decades. Black male students in college have always encountered challenges, but when spirituality and race intersect, campus life can be even more difficult to



navigate. According to Claerbaut (1976), the dominance of white student norms created alienation for Black students at PWCIIs. The three themes emerging from his study were Black student recruitment, Black faculty, and Black cultural expression. It is important to note that, although this study was conducted in 1976, it can be considered the most recent study on the topic due to the very limited amount of research that has addressed Black males at PWCIIs. Interestingly, all of Claerbaut's themes emerged in my study in some form, and these same issues are still prevalent today some 40 years later at PWCIIs. In the interviews, my study's participants spoke about the racism they experience in the classroom and across campus. Additionally, many of them expressed frustration about the lack of Black faculty and the disbanding of the one organization that supported them, the Black Student Association. Ash & Schreiner (2016) recommended that, to improve campus life for Black students, PWCIIs must make an institutional commitment to student welfare, and Black students must feel that "they have a seat at the table" when engaging in their collegiate experience.

The finding *Black male students feel that they are carrying the torch* speaks to the overall experiences of Black males at PWCIIs. Strayhorn (2014) noted the importance of "grit," defined as perseverance or persistence through difficult circumstances, in the academic success of Black males. My study challenges the notion that Black males need grit. I would argue instead that my study's participants possess "steadfastness," the strength and resolve to remain focused on their aspirations in spite of challenges (Dillard, 2006). Likewise, through their spirituality, they have the resolve to endure all situations. Yosso (2005) shares

several different capitals that Black students bring with them to college. The participants shared how their spirituality was strengthened by family and this is one of the capitals that they arrive with family capital, and this helps them endure in an individualistic system. The institution through racist and bigoted policies are isolating Black males, which often “grit” would be used to fight through the isolation, however, “steadfastness” is strengthened through the community that the Black male student has supporting him. Participants also expressed the *honor* they feel: The experience of being the only Black male student in a class or a student organization empowers them to try to be their best in every situation. Several participants shared that they know that they are on display or being watched, so they are unofficially the representatives for all Black males.

The participants who were athletes expressed that, although they chose their college for the athletic opportunities, they ultimately want to graduate. These student athletes reported that their spirituality was important to them. Black male athletes are often viewed as property or as a means to generate revenue, so colleges place little value on their experience or their education, and certainly not their spiritual development. The relationship between Black bodies and athletics is important because of the “plantation politics” that arise when colleges or professional teams use the Black male to earn revenue (Dancy, Edwards, & Davis, 2018). During anti-Black colonization and in the establishment of higher education institutions, ministers who proclaimed the gospel also tortured and murdered Black people. This mentality still exists today at PWCI, where Black males are viewed as threatening, useful for labor, and best used as an athlete. Since athletics is a way to

pay for college and the institution will use Black males' athletic ability to offer to pay for school. For the Black males who cannot afford to go to college, they are now labor coerced because if they want to attend to school, then they have to provide the labor to pay the tuition bill.

The study shows that, if given the proper support and tools to succeed, Black males can be successful at PWCIIs. The participants I had the opportunity to interview were all intelligent, capable, articulate Black men. They were not on a special program or at the school just to play sports. Institutions should view Black males as more than just athletes or "special" admits. Black male students actually do the academic work necessary to gain admission and persist at the institution, and they have the academic capital to be successful if the institution provides the proper support (Harper & Griffin, 2010).

### **Implications**

When this study began, I felt that I already understood what it meant to be a Black Christian male college student, having been one myself. However, as the study progressed, I noticed that my experiences were very different from my participants' because I had attended a secular university, which was intended to serve students' academic and social needs but not their spiritual development. The study participants' stories showed me that integrating one's Black, male, and Christian identities, while always difficult, is even more difficult for those who attend a PWCI. Much has been said and written about Black male college students, but the focus is overwhelmingly on a "deficit" narrative, starting from the assumption that Black male students are not as successful academically as other

groups because they are “missing” something (adequate K-12 preparation, sufficient financial resources, etc.) (Bates, 2017). However, this study reveals that Black men also possess many strengths, one of which is spirituality, which has been shown to sustain, encourage, uplift, and guide them while enduring college. Black males do not often get to speak for themselves regarding issues that directly affect them, but in my study, the voices speaking on issues of race, spirituality, and equity in higher education come directly from their lived experiences.

This study allows stakeholders at PWCI to see firsthand how Black males experience the PWCI environment. Administrators might tend to assume that, because racial issues have not come to their attention on their campus, these issues do not exist. However, the lived experiences of the brave Black men in this study indicate otherwise and should be considered a serious notice, because there is clearly a population of students who are not being supported or developed. If Christian colleges and universities promote spiritual development and have mission statements that explicitly state a commitment to the gospel, then they must look at how to meet the needs of Black male students. This study documents the need to go beyond academic support, beyond social support, and beyond athletic engagement, because the participants’ voices reveal Black men struggling spiritually in a place that explicitly claims to promote students’ spiritual development.

From a spiritual perspective, if a person or institution proclaims to live out the Christian gospel but does not employ the practices of love, grace, mercy, and support, then these are nothing more than fancy words. The lived experiences revealed in this study show that Black males are intelligent and can thrive in

academically rigorous colleges; they can succeed socially and athletically; and with the right support, they can thrive spiritually. This can be achieved by recruiting more Black faculty, selecting more Black preachers both men and women for chapel, and providing more spiritual programs and events for Black students beyond just the clichéd Black History Month.

Those who seek to address Black male students' needs should consider the intersections of race, gender, and Christian identities. A good starting place is to consult the previous research on student and identity development, such as student involvement theory (Astin, 1977); student departure theory (Tinto, 1987); spiritual and religious qualities in college students (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011); and literature on manhood, masculinity, faith as they relate to Black males (Dancy, 2010 & 2011).

### **Recommendations for Higher Education**

All higher education institutions should seek to understand how students' spirituality affects their success. Christian institutions in particular should attend to the spiritual development of all students, because they promote a gospel of Jesus Christ that is supposed to be inclusive, not exclusive. Christian institutions are behind and considering the last major study on black students at Christian institutions was Clauerbaut (1976), policies and practices have not changed over decades. Many institutions are using religious exemptions or religious liberty to circumvent federal rules that would require them to be inclusive. As a result, many white Christian institutions have now used the Christian faith as a cover for racism, sexism, and prejudice policy and practice. I recommend the use of an equity

scorecard, much like the one from University of Southern California (USC) Center for Urban Education. This scorecard allows an institution to go beyond just discussion and hoping to be more inclusive, it actually reveals the steps and data needed to make changes on campus.

It is important that student affairs personnel understand how to develop programs and events that support identity development and encourage spiritual growth. Likewise, administrators should establish inclusive policies and be willing to challenge exclusive and oppressive policies, because if the institution's policies do not match its mission, the institution will fail at student development. Administrators also should recruit more faculty and staff of color; with an increasingly diverse student body, it is imperative to employ faculty, staff, and administrators who not only look like those they serve but who also can relate to students' diverse life experiences. Furthermore, more needs to be done to address the curricular experiences of Black males. Faculty need training on how to teach Black males and how to avoid microaggressions' in teaching, bias in grading, and blatant racist comments to Black male students. Additionally, institutions should provide opportunities for Black males to expand their worldview by study abroad, experiential learning, and other opportunities that are outside the traditional classroom experience.

It would also be beneficial for PWCIIs to seek partnerships with local churches and social organizations that support minority students. These partnerships can provide opportunities for Black pastors to be a part of the institution, and they also show Black students a tangible way in which the university supports them.

Such partnerships also could help improve a PWCI's reputation in the Black community and among potential Black students, which in turn could help the institution's efforts to recruit more Black students. However, the Black church and social organizations should be careful to normalize or reinforce white supremacy by partnering and not challenging racist policies and practices. In addition, institutions should provide diverse spiritual development opportunities, fostering spiritual growth for students of all backgrounds and identities.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study's findings provide insight into the experiences of Black male students; however, many avenues of research have not yet been undertaken. One approach to future research would be to replicate this study of Black males' spiritual development at other types of institutions. Likewise, studies of Black women students' experiences at PWCIIs would shed additional light on PWCIIs' level of success in supporting Black students. Follow-up studies using different methodologies, expanded populations, and participants at institutions with different denominational affiliations could also expand our knowledge. A few areas for further research detailed below.

#### **The Black Church**

A study on how the Black church as a social institution engages Black male collegians may add to the conversation about how to ensure the success of Black males in our community. It also might be valuable to study the influence of pastors and other church leaders on Black males' success. Eight participants in this study reported that, when they were children or teens, they had a positive relationship with

a pastor who provided them with support, encouragement, and preparation for life. Another possible direction for research is the role of the Black church in women's oppression; a critical analysis of the environment of the Black church might spur further disruption of its patriarchal structures.

### **Other Religions**

Another potential topic for study is Black male students who hold religious identities other than Christian. Although Christianity is the dominant religion in the United States, not all Black males are Christian. It would be worth researching how college and university environments meet the spiritual, academic, and social needs of students who hold other religious or spiritual identities. This line of inquiry could also be extended to study Black males who are not religious or who are not connected to a formal religious organization. Additionally, some non-Christian religions may have practices that are particularly supportive of Black males; that PWCI could potentially use to support students.

### **Black Women**

Research on Black women who attend PWCI would add valuable knowledge to the literature. Black women are successful in some areas of the academy, but they too face challenges, some of which Black males will never encounter. As I conducted this study, I met three Black women students who wanted to tell their stories, even though my study was focused on Black males. Black women students' perspectives are just as important as Black males', and it would be beneficial for future researchers to capture their stories and shed light on their intersectional experiences.



## **Black Faculty**

Research on Black faculty at PWCI's would add depth to the literature on the intersections of race, Christianity, and spiritual development in higher education. During this study, I had the privilege of meeting several Black faculty members who shared both their experiences and their thoughts about support for Black male students. Black faculty members and Black students often have had similar life experiences, and it would be valuable to know how Black faculty members reconcile their spirituality with the PWCI's practices. Additionally, many of this study's participants shared that they are looking for mentors to help them navigate at Faith University, so it would be worthwhile to study the mentoring practices of Black faculty members at PWCI's.

## **College Choice**

If PWCI's do not have inclusive and supporting environments, then a future study on college choice for Black males who identify as Christian may be beneficial to the field of higher education. If Black males cannot go to a place where their Christian identity is supported and encouraged to develop, then they should consider going to a place where they can get this support. It may be in the best interest of Black males who are Christian to consider HBCUs who often have a chapel on campus and connection to the Black church, which in return could address the academic, social, and spiritual needs of Black male college students.

## **Conclusion**

There continues to be a strong disconnect between PWCI's and Black male students. Black male students are pursuing higher education at PWCI's, yet they feel

that they do not belong, that they are not developing spiritually, and that they are forced to conform to white religious norms in order to graduate. The irony is that Christian institutions' mission statements speak of an inclusive gospel and promote the engagement of all of God's children, even while these colleges ignore the needs of their Black male students. Through continued research and the implementation of inclusive programs, this problem can be eliminated. It is imperative that university administrators, staff, and coaches become aware of the issue and work together to find solutions. It is also important that Black Christian male collegians be aware of their feelings, challenges, and needs, so that they can hold accountable those in power. Furthermore, they should accept nothing less than the utmost support in all areas of their lives, with special attention to spirituality, because that is the PWCI's explicit focus. In spite of the challenges, however, I am encouraged by the steadfastness and faithfulness of the Black Christian male students that I met while conducting this study, and I am blessed to have been a part of their journey. So until change comes, "Let the Church say "Amen?"

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## Appendix A. Demographic Profile

**1. What is your Name? (First, Middle, Last)**

**2. What is your Age?**

**3. Grade Classification (Select One)**

☐ Freshman ☐ Sophomore ☐ Junior ☐ Senior ☐ Graduate

**4. With which racial or ethnic category do you identify?**

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> American Indian or Alaska Native | <input type="checkbox"/> Hispanic or Latino      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Black or African American        | <input type="checkbox"/> Asian or Asian American |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Hawaiian or Pacific Islander     | <input type="checkbox"/> Non-Hispanic White      |
|   | <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____             |

**5. What is your family yearly income?**

☐ Less than \$60,000 ☐ \$60,001 to \$70,000 ☐ \$70,001 to \$80,000  
☐ \$80,001 to \$90,000 ☐ \$90,001 to \$100,000 ☐ Greater than \$100,000

**6. Did you grow up attending a predominately black church?**

☐ Yes or ☐ No

**If Yes, what was the name of the church?**

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**7. With what Christian denomination do you most closely identify? (e.g., Baptist, COGIC, Methodist, CME, AME, or Non-denominational)**

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**8. How strong is your spirituality?**

☐ Very Strong ☐ Slightly Strong ☐ Not Strong at all

**9. How important is to you to attend religious services?**

☐ Very Important ☐ Slightly Important ☐ Not Very Important

**10. How important is it for you to be connected to a religious community?**

☐ Very Important ☐ Slightly Important ☐ Not Very Important

## **Appendix B. Interview Protocol**

1. Did you attend church as a child/adolescent?
2. Did you attend a predominately Black church?
3. As a child/adolescent, how involved in church were you?
4. Do you attend chapel regularly here on campus? Why or Why not? Do you feel you belong there? Why or why not?
5. How important was your childhood pastor in your life? Why or why not?
6. How important were other church leaders? Why or why not?
7. How important was the church body in your life? Why or why not?
8. How important is attending church to you? Why?
9. As a student, describe your experience as a Black male? We can start with one identity. What does it mean to be Black here? What does it mean to be a Black man here? What other aspects of your identity matter to you as a Black male college student? Provides examples (e.g. ability, sexual orientation, class)
10. Have you faced any issues (discrimination; lack of support spiritually, socially, academically; unwelcomed at activities or events) as a Black student here at Faith University?
11. What helped you get through negative or challenging issues you have experienced?
12. What role does faith play for you while in college?
13. How do you practice your Christianity while in school?
14. Do you feel that more can be done to help Black males develop Christian identity? What? Why (if needed)?
15. Do you feel connected to Christians of different races on campus? If so, in what ways? If not, why not?
16. How would you describe your experience in the classroom? Do you feel welcomed or like you belong?
17. How would you describe your experience at weekly chapel service or any other spiritual life chapel service?
18. Have your interactions with your professors been positive or negative? Please explain.
19. Do you participate in co-curricular groups or organizations? If so, do you feel welcomed or like you belong?
20. Are you involved in any spiritual life student events or activities (i.e.- Welcome Week, Bible Study, Mission Trips)?
21. Do you have any strong relationships or friendships with your classmates, roommates, or other students on campus?